PURSUIT

ROLAND PERTWEE

$2.00

PURSUIT

By Roland Pertwee

Harley Trevelyan and Joan Miller began their romance among the chimney-pots of a London roof while raiding Zeppelins swung overhead in the beams of a hundred searchlights. Then the Captain went out to walk the streets and to return at dawn with a cartload — nothing less! — of flowers as his first lover's offering to Joan.

The scene shifts to France and the front lines. There we find Trevelyan and Joan's irresistible brother. There, too, are Captain Fawlk, who hates Trevelyan, and passionate, tempestuous Paula Drayton. Again the scene shifts; this time to the heart of Africa, where Trevelyan must seek out the sinister Fawlk. The story of that extraordinary pursuit — a pursuit that ends in the meeting of Trevelyan and Fawlk, of hero and villain, in the African jungle — is told with stark power and vividness. Few incidents in recent fiction are more striking or memorable than the march of the two mortal enemies bound in the same slave chain.

PURSUIT

ROLAND PERTWEE

REFERENCE LIBRARY * HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CO. * BOSTON, MASS.
Archive Collection
This book may not leave the Offices
and if borrowed must be returned within 7 days

PURSUIT

BOOKS BY
ROLAND PERTWEE

OUR WONDERFUL SELVES
THE OLD CARD
THE TRANSACTIONS OF LORD LOUIS LEWIS
THE EAGLE AND THE WREN
MEN OF AFFAIRS
SINGING WELLS
TREASURE TRAIL
RIVERS TO CROSS
GENTLEMEN MARCH
INTERFERENCE
FISH ARE SUCH LIARS
HELL'S LOOSE
PURSUIT

PURSUIT

BY

ROLAND PERTWEE

TOVT
BIEN OV
RIEN

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1930

COPYRIGHT, 1930, BY ROLAND PERTWEE

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO REPRODUCE
THIS BOOK OR PARTS THEREOF IN ANY FORM

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

PURSUIT

Book I

PURSUIT

⁂

BOOK I

I

If Harley Trevelyan had any fixed purpose on the last day of his leave, it was to shut himself away, as far as possible, from the war and all that pertained thereunto. A hopeless ambition, for in London the war intruded itself upon the imagination even more insistently than at the front. It roared at one from the pavements — buses — in clubs — bars and theatres. There was no escaping it. Posters — hoardings — even the wares in shops were saturated in its word or livery. Perhaps that was why a notice in the windows of a Bond Street gallery, 'Modern French Painters,' drew Harley irresistibly. Here, at least, a new element was offered. He remembered, too, that Fawlk, his O.C., had been lyric in his praises of the exhibition, urging him, with that characteristic stressing of certain words which had brought so many men to the verge of mutiny, 'On *no* account must you *miss* it.'

Also he had said, 'My dear Trevelyan, it's very *instructive* — very revealing. Help to clear your mind of outworn *fetters*.'

Even though he might not agree, it would provide something to argue about when he got back to the battery. That was inducement enough. A new opinion on any subject was as rare as it was worth having in France. One came to know the limits of a man's horizon with such deadly precision — a few stock phrases — a threadbare jest — silence and the gramophone.

Harley pushed open the swing doors and entered. A young man seated behind a table looked at him coldly and dispassionately and switched on some lights.

Feeling absurdly hostile, Harley began his tour of inspection.

The Cézannes and a single Van Gogh interested him and annoyed him equally. The 'Pont Saint-Martin,' by Utrillo, captured and held his imagination from the first glance, as also did a Manet with its insolent disregard for academic convention — its quality of 'essentialism' — the almost shocking bluntness of its statement, and its vitalisation of subject.

Reluctantly he felt himself admitting the argument of these rebels against the pretty-prettiness of the Victorians — reluctantly because he had no inclination to agree with the case Fawlk had advanced in their favour. Arbitrarily he would have preferred to quarrel with Fawlk on any matter involving taste. But it couldn't be helped. He foresaw agreement rather than argument. It was disappointing.

It was dusk when he came out into the street again.

What to do next?

His few duty calls had already been paid. His friends were scattered over the fighting fronts of Europe.

Until dinner there was nothing to do — no one to see — only time to kill.

To-morrow he would be back in France.

His nerves, trained by all the circumstances of war to indifference, were snapping and tightening unpleasantly.

'Time enough for a game of squash at the Bath Club,' he thought. 'Then I'll thaw myself out in the Turkish bath.'

He had avoided thinking of Paula Drayton, and there was no sign of her when, after a stretch along the Mall, he walked into the Palm Court and looked about him. His watch and the clock in the foyer were in disagreement. The larger and presumably more reliable timepiece informed him that he was a quarter of an hour too soon for their appointment. Time enough for a cocktail before facing the ordeal that awaited him.

It was strange that the thought of dining with Paula should appear an ordeal.

Other men's eyes would visit and dwell upon the table at which they sat together. The blue-black sweep of her short hair — her dark grave eyes and long white face were magnetic of attention. She did not lack for beauty. It was her earnestness that awed him — the undeviating concentration upon himself that, without deliberate effort, he inspired in her. Most men would have found it flattering, but not Harley. It made him awkward, embarrassed. It robbed him of humour, of gaiety, and set his fingers crumbling bread or fiddling with the winder of his watch. She was fond of him, of course — useless to deny that. She loved him, likely enough, in that smouldering way of hers that was at once slavish and possessive. It seemed mean and cavalier to reward her steadfast adoration with nothing more than the brand of friendship he was able to offer.

The situation would be funny if it were not tragic. Funny, because in her company he felt shy as a schoolboy — tragic, because her sincerity was so deep.

What little he had done and was doing in the war she magnified to a dimension that would have made any man wish medals had never been struck. It was hard to dodge a few decorations in the third year of the war. Thicker than bullets they fell in certain areas and struck a man over the heart with a good deal more precision.

He wished, perhaps disloyally, that Paula had refused his invitation to dine. It was the last night of his leave — the last night, perhaps, that he would ever spend in England. In a way it would have been preferable, and maybe less harmful, to get quietly drunk and forgetful. Yet, when he had asked her to dine, he could not be cruel enough to omit enthusiasm from the invitation. She would want to talk about her brother, of course, that adored young brother whose eighteenth birthday had brought him to a slaughterable age.

With a bit of wrangling, Harley had got the youngster posted to his own battery. He would have given much to avoid doing that. There was good stuff in the boy—real quality—even though he shared with Paula rather more temperament than warfare can conveniently accommodate.

'I don't want you to do it if you'd rather not,' Paula had said.

What could he answer? She knew he could pull a few strings at the 'War House' — that he had influence. And he knew that David Drayton was the pith and core of her existence — outside himself.

'I know he'll be all right with you,' she had said.

You must not lightly rob a woman of that kind of conviction. It left Harley no choice. He had made a show of willingness and the thing was done. With the knowledge that her brother's posting to 007 Siege Battery was an accomplished fact, something of terror in Paula's eyes was lulled to sleep.

That in itself was no great reward, but went some way towards lifting the few extra pounds of weight the boy's coming would add to the burden of Harley's responsibility.

It was not a war to wage in the company of friends. The odds were too steep. With all the will in the world, a man cannot brush a shell aside nor turn the sniper's bullet.

Harley descended to the cocktail bar and found himself alongside Freddie Miller, in whose company, during the days of their youth, many wild nights had been spent. It was two years since last they met.

'Not dead?' Freddie crowed ecstatically. 'How very strange and beautiful! Have one of these little scamps,' and he held up his glass.

The bar man, a prominent member of the Secret Service, in defiance of the No Treating Order conveyed ice to the shaker and smiled a welcome.

'Where have you been?' Harley asked, eyeing with suspicion a number of mysterious foreign decorations that adorned his friend's tunic.

'A Christmas party at the Savoy Hotel,' the young man replied. 'I was pipped in Gallipoli and they gave me three months' Home Duty, showing the Tower Bridge and Madame Tussaud's to distinguished neutrals. These' — he tapped his breast with pride — 'came out of the crackers. I dare say I should have collected more, but the Baron, my noble and loving sire, thought it was time Fritz had another packet at me. I rejoin my unit as from to-morrow and the funeral is fixed for Saturday. There will be no flowers.' He finished his drink and called for more.

'What unit?' Harley asked. 'Still the old lot?'

Freddie Miller blushed.

'As a fighting man my stock is a bit down. They've gone and shoved me in the A.S.C. I imagine they were influenced by my passion for kidneys and the fact that before the war I was summoned twenty-four times for furious driving.'

'Supplies?' Harley queried.

Freddie shook his head.

'Ammunition. They tell me,' he added, 'that it is much more dangerous than it ought to be. Still, the Millers are a fearless crowd. Nothing gets 'em down.'

'If you go by the seven-forty,' said Harley, 'we might travel together. My leave's up, too.'

'I thought you were a bit low,' said Freddie. 'But why part from each other at this stage? I don't want to boast about it, but I'm dining at home to-night. Come along, too. My mother's a complete entertainment, and Joan, though I say it of my own sister, would make the winner of a beauty competition look like rice pudden.'

'Sorry,' Harley said, and was sorry. 'I'm dining here with Paula Drayton. Her brother's joining my battery in a few days. I've made a sort of promise to shelter the boy.'

'You would,' was the answer. 'That's just the kind of damn silly — what's the word — altruism you would be guilty of. The only thing I ever had against you was your habit of carrying other people's pigeons. I know Paula, and if anything happens to that young brother of hers, the whole nation and you in particular will be held answerable. Now, Joan ——'

But Harley had finished his drink and backed out through the crowd that gathered round the bar.

He arrived at the Palm Court as Paula Drayton came through the south door. She was wearing a black cloak and held the collar of white fox tightly over the lower half of her face.

A noisy group of officers and girls at a table on the left stopped talking to watch her pass. Seeing Harley, she moved swiftly and trailed out a long white arm to him. He asked if she wanted a cocktail, but she shook her head.

'Then let's go in to dinner. I've ordered a table.'

She had no views as to the choice of food, and for some minutes, conscious of her eyes, Harley stared irresolutely at the menu.

'If monsieur would leave this to me, I shall arrange something nice,' the waiter suggested.

'Yes, go ahead,' said Harley, fumbled for meat coupons, and ordered 'some of that Bollinger I had yesterday.'

'Bien, monsieur.'

Then silence — an effort to smile — an effort to resist fiddling with things — an effort to look glad and happy — all failures. And Paula's black eyes were boring holes into him.

'It was good of you to bear me company to-night,' he managed to say at last.

'No,' she answered.

He looked up questioningly.

'No,' she repeated, with her low 'cello-like quality of voice. 'Just selfish. All day I've been urging myself to let you off, but I couldn't.'

'But what nonsense!' he said. 'All day I've been looking forward ——'

She would not allow him to finish the lie. Her finger-tips touched his mouth to silence it.

'I know — I know what you feel — better than you do, Harley. But somehow I couldn't deny myself. Why reproach yourself for not loving me? There's no reproach. Love isn't compelled by politeness. You have it or you haven't. But why be sorry I love you? Why feel responsible? I'm not asking anything. I make no demands. Can't you be vulgar enough to be glad you matter to a woman, even though she may mean less to you than a smile from a girl across the footlights?'

'I am glad — who could fail to be, Paula, only ——'

'Only you wish to Heaven I'd have the decency to keep my feelings to myself.'

'No. No.'

'But I understand that well enough. Men have loved me — men I cared nothing for — and I have hated them for the nuisances they were. But I told them the truth. I didn't insult them by treating their love with courtesy.' The sullen embers in her eyes blazed into fire. 'Don't you — don't you dare to do that, Harley. Be brutal — caddish — cruel as you like and I won't complain, but don't treat my love for you with polite condescension.'

Harley pushed back his plate half angrily.

'Paula,' he said, 'if you can tell me what a man is supposed to say or do in a case like this, I'll try to say it and do it — but if you can't, then for pity's sake ——'

'Shut up?'

'Yes,' he replied finally.

'That's better,' said Paula. 'Thank you, Harley. It clears the air. I will shut up and pack up and clear out. But it was better to let you know how things stood. You are woman blind. Too ignorant and too gentlemanly to realise facts that stare you in the face.' She rose and he rose, too. 'No, don't follow me — if you follow I shall hit you in the mouth before everyone. You've been wonderful to take on David — perhaps you fathomed why I've wished him onto you — well, that wasn't the only reason — it existed, yes, but I wanted him to be with the man I admire more than anyone else in the world. And you've made me happier than I ever hoped to be. Bless you, darling. God bless and keep you for — for whomever it may be.'

He watched, in gloomy bewilderment, as she swept out of the restaurant.

'Madame has gone?' said the waiter, arriving with the fish.

Harley nodded.

'Yes, gone. Take that stuff away and bring me a steak.'

2

Harley did not linger over the meal. His solitary table inspired too much speculation from other guests. He felt he had emerged from one of the toughest engagements in which the war had involved him — and one in which he had acquitted himself ingloriously.

Calling for his accumulated bills of the last ten days, he paid them by cheque and drifted aimlessly into the gloom of Haymarket. A crescent moon and a night sequined with stars lit the roadway more brightly than the smothered arc standards. Above him white pools and rods of light wandered inquiringly across the heavens.

What a dark, ominous place this London of the war had become! With no set purpose he walked into Piccadilly, up Bond Street, and lefterly to Berkeley Square. A friend, Paul Knighton, had put him up in Curzon Street, but it was only ten o'clock, and Paul, who worked in the Censorship Department, seldom reached home before midnight. A dull finish to a man's leave to sit in an empty house and watch a fire burn out. He paused by the railings of the square, debating whether he should try to get into a show of some kind, and had almost resolved to do so when a maroon was fired and a branch of red-and-green stars burst into flower above the roof of Devonshire House.

Air raid. The first London air raid he had experienced.

Almost before the reverberations had died away, the busy pavements were deserted and the noise of traffic ceased. A lean black cat, Harley Trevelyan, and a special constable, on duty by the corner of Lansdowne Passage, were the only visible creatures in the square. One or two cars fled away from the doors of the Berkeley Grill and a hush of expectation fell over the city. From the east and south, faint but gathering in volume, came the pulsing rumble of gun-fire, and simultaneously countless searchlights held up long protesting arms against the invisible raiders.

For a better view, Harley moved from the shelter of the trees that overhang the square to the pavement opposite. He had scarcely reached it when a window was thrown open and the silhouette of a girl's head and shoulders appeared against the dimly lit room beyond.

'That's right,' said a voice; 'don't worry yourself about regulations, old thing; get us all jugged for signalling to the enemy.'

A switch clicked and the room was plunged into darkness.

Followed a trickle of fluid laughter and the man's voice again saying, 'Bag all the room; that's the way.'

The words were scarcely spoken when, with a stinging crash that set window-frames rattling, a battery of guns in Green Park opened fire.

'Toddy's lot,' said the girl. 'Toddy's always the first to let fly. He does it for my sake. He can't have got a target yet.'

A spent shell whined downward dismally and fell with a 'womp' in the roadway.

Involuntarily Harley moved a few steps nearer the railings of the house and lit a cigarette. In doing so he was seen by the two at the window.

'Soldier,' said the girl, for it was too dark to tell whether he was officer, non-commissioned officer, or man, 'soldier! Hadn't you better come inside?'

Something in her voice made the invitation sound good.

'It's all right, thanks,' he said. 'I was just going home.'

'You'd have done it, too, if you'd caught that little souvenir on the dome,' she answered. 'Freddie, go and haul him in.'

Thus adjured, her companion removed himself from the window and presently was heard opening the front door.

'Step in quickly, sir,' he sang out, 'because I'm not due to die until Saturday.'

'Freddie Miller!' Harley cried, groping through the unlighted passage.

'You old ass — why couldn't you say who you were?' came the joyous reply, overwhelmed somewhat by the activity of 'Toddy's lot' at the bottom of the street.

'Hi, Joan. This poor soldier of yours is Harley Trevelyan. The beggar who wouldn't feed with us for fear of doing you out of your butter ration.'

'Have him along, then,' she replied. 'Can't leave the window, but there's room for three if you don't mind a scrum.'

The yellow flashes from Toddy's battery lit up her small close-cropped head as she spoke, for Joan Miller was a pioneer of the shingle.

Harley found himself crammed tightly against her with his elbow on the sill. Her bare shoulder, pressed against his, was restless with excitement.

On the opposite side of the road a running man saw them, stopped and pointed.

'Behind you!' he yelled. 'Coming over three abreast! Sock it into 'em, boys!'

'Oh, Jimminy, and I can't see,' wailed Joan, in an ecstasy of grief and twisting her head round like an owl. 'Oh, damn! I can't see, and I've cricked my neck. Where are they, Mr. Man?'

'Behind you — over and behind.'

Footsteps clattered up the street.

Joan struggled to be free.

'Me for the roof!' she cried. 'Anyone coming?'

'No!' yelled Freddie.

'I am,' said Harley, and found her hand in his dragging him towards the door. Like a couple of children they raced up the dimly lit staircase. From below came the voice of Freddie in a mock whine.

'All right, you two, I'll go and wake up Mother.'

'Isn't Freddie an ass? Don't you adore him?' Joan gasped joyously. 'Mother always sees 'em from the bathroom — standing on the bath. Fell in once — she did. We've all got our air-raid stations. Only one more flight.'

She had led all the way, giving him no chance to see her face. And the top landing was in complete darkness.

Joan fumbled and emitted a despairing wail.

'There! He's done it — he said he would, last time. Rogers, our butler; he's taken away the ladder. Here, you're tall — stand fast.'

He felt his wrists seized tightly, her warm breath against his cheek, and a satin slipper planted unceremoniously in the pit of his stomach. A second later, by a route known only to herself, she was balanced perilously upon his shoulders. Something thumped.

'That's my head,' she said, straightened up, and in the ceiling above an oblong of night sky fretted with searchlights sprang into view.

The weight on his shoulders was lifted and a pair of very boyish legs trod the air and vanished upward to a crescendo of roaring artillery. Only the square of night sky remained.

Harley heard himself crying aloud, 'Wait for me,' with the pathetic plaint of a child left behind.

Faintly he heard, 'Oh, it's gorgeous! Stand on the bannister rail and jump.'

He hadn't thought of that. He was no Blondin, and the staircase well yawned threateningly. But inducement was running very high.

He climbed, rocked a second, crouched, and sprang. His head and shoulders plunged through the trap and his arms came down flat on the leads.

The rest was easy. A moment later he was standing beside her among the chimney pots with an arm about her shoulders; while high above them, held in the claws of a hundred searchlights, three small cigarette-like things floated indifferently against a background of crackling sparks.

In the presence of that strange and awe-inspiring spectacle, Joan's voice sank to a whisper.

'First Zepps I've seen. Always missed 'em somehow. Oh, but isn't it — isn't it — isn't it marvellous?'

Harley nodded and tightened his grip about her shoulders as the combined anti-aircraft defences of London delivered themselves of a whirlwind of screaming, searching shells. Before the venom of that attack the invaders rose to a higher altitude and changed their formation — one to the north, one south, and one hanging motionless and indeterminate almost, above where they stood watching.

In a temporary hush, consequent upon an order to alter the ranges, came a sound which once heard is never forgotten. The whine of an aërial torpedo spinning earthward through thousands of feet of naked space.

'Look out!' Harley warned, and shut the girl up in his arms, his two hands cupped about her head.

The deep-throated hideous roar that followed made the house tremble like a live thing. A blaze of yellow light enveloped the whole neighborhood, and from near and far came the tinkle, clink, and chuckle of falling glass and tiles.

Then again and again — roar following roar in quick succession splitting the night with tongues of leaping flame.

A pall of dust rose and blotted out the sky. A red glow on its underside shining where fires had begun to burn. From the west the clanging bells of a fire engine drew nearer and nearer, smothered by a crash louder and more venomous than any that had gone before. The wind of that final burst set them rocking like trees before the gale. Something light and feathery — the fragment of a sofa cushion — fell at their feet.

'That last one — it must have been just there — by the Ritz,' said Joan.

He nodded. 'Near enough, anyway.'

'I wonder if ——' she began, changed her mind, and said angrily, 'That's enough from you up there in the sky. Time we had something to say.'

And as if in answer to a command, a new sound intruded itself into that devil's orchestra — the whine of a plane — clear as the notes of a violin.

He was too high to be seen — the lonely pilot who policed the air roads of the city. It may have been luck rather than judgment directed his courses and the course of a ribbon of tracer bullets emptied at close range into the belly of the invader. He had spiralled out of harm's way before the first tongue of flame licked along the monster's sides. Those below saw more of his handiwork than he was privileged to see.

'Got him!' gasped Joan, and her fingers tightened about Harley's like a vice. 'Got him!'

Afterward Harley wondered if any other man ever beheld for the first time the face of the woman he came to love by the glare of a blazing Zeppelin, which made her seem, as she stood among the sooty chimney pots, like a creature of fire.

3

Providence, which directs that winds shall blow and sparrows fall, has a knack of defending the defenceless. A breeze stirring from seaward bore the blazing wreckage away from the habitations of man, to fall a charred and twisted skeleton in a playing-field north of London.

The searchlights winked and went out. The guns grumbled and were silent and bugles shouted the 'All Clear.'

How long Joan and Harley stood watching that awful pageant in the sky, they neither knew nor cared. The red glow had died down and the tranquil stars had reappeared before consciousness of themselves returned.

Joan gave an outward breath and shivered.

'Poor brutes!' she said, 'but they asked for it — they did ask for it. Don't you feel awfully hungry? I do. Let's go down — shall we?'

'Let's,' he echoed.

As they walked across the flat roof, her foot slipped on a shrapnel bullet. Quite a number of bits and pieces had rained down upon the leads. The discovery made Harley angry and responsible. What a thoughtless fool he had been to expose the girl to such a hazard! Anyone of those bits might —— He turned and looked at her.

'What's the matter with you?' she asked.

He was about to reply when two hands and a face appeared in the black mouth of the trapdoor.

'I say, you two,' said the voice of Freddie Miller, 'Mother is now vacating the bathroom, and it might be tactful to come down.'

'We're on the way,' Harley replied.

'Good,' said Freddie. '*Honi soit qui Palais de Danse*, and all that, but, in spite of an affection for dog-fights, Mother is a stout Victorian and might think it peculiar for Joan to entertain gunner officers on the tiles.'

Joan's descent through the trapdoor showed complete disdain for the interests of the frock she wore. It is true there was nothing in the world could injure her appearance. It was of the kind that transcended external adornments. In sackcloth she would have lost none of her loveliness. With her frock ripped, her hands black, and a smudge of soot upon the tip of her insolent nose, she looked even more distractingly lovely than the most ardent attention to details of the toilet could have rendered her.

To ensure themselves that Lady Miller had actually vacated the bathroom, they entered it together and all had a wash in the same basin, crossing the water and spitting in it for luck, and getting easy with each other in consequence. Then they all dried their hands on one towel and brushed their hair with one brush, and, since there is no thirstier work than watching an air raid, they all had a drink out of the tooth-glass. Indeed, their conduct in the bathroom was distinguished by a spirit of good-fellowship unmarred by conventional or hygienic considerations.

Cleansed, refreshed, and fortified, they descended to the drawing-room, where Lady Miller, after the excitements of the raid, had resorted to the soporific influences of knitting a Balaclava helmet in rainbow wool.

'That's one less,' she said, as they entered the room, referring, no doubt, to the raider. Seeing Harley, she added, 'And one more that I don't know.'

'I forget his name,' said Joan, 'but he's a friend of Freddie's and very much above the average.'

Harley blushed, bowed, and was introduced.

'Trevelyan,' Lady Miller repeated. 'Oh, yes, it comes back to me. Your grandfather was one of the great Victorian novelists. I know your aunt, a disagreeable old lady who lives in Grosvenor Square and cheats in quite a nice way at Bridge. And you' — she wrinkled her smooth forehead meditatively — 'you were at Magdalen with Freddie, and write short stories.'

'Now you've got your dossier,' said Joan, 'let's go and get some food. Mother, may we use the kitchen?'

'No,' said Lady Miller, 'you may not, but, as you certainly will, please, Captain Trevelyan, see that they respect my butter. At this stage of war and time of night, dripping is good enough for anyone. And, Joan ——'

'Hullo,' said Joan, halfway to the door.

'You are not to touch the offal because it's for your father's dinner to-morrow.'

Together they descended to the basement, where Rogers, the butler, a man of grave and formidable appearance, aided by a large-scale map of France, was delivering a lecture upon the war to two female servants, a page boy, and the housekeeper, Mrs. Blake. It had become an understood thing during air raids for Rogers to lecture upon the war. It served, as he pointed out, 'to distract the minds of females from present dangers, but at the same time to keep them patriotically occupied.'

From an historical and tactical point of view the lectures were not illuminating, being devoted exclusively to the names of places associated with names of officers, familiar to the household, who had sustained death or injury in that area.

'Mons,' he said, 'Mons will never be forgotten because it was there that Lord Frederic, our Master Sir Balliol's cousin, had a glorious fall.'

'Off an 'orse?' the page boy demanded.

'Not off a horse, but into everlasting glory,' was the ponderous reply.

'Rogers is lecturing,' Joan whispered. 'Don't make a noise and we might hear a bit.'

'I call upon you, Louisa,' said Rogers, directing an index finger at the second housemaid, 'to repeat what I told you about Weeps, or, as our soldiers call it, Wipers.'

'I couldn't, Mr. Rogers,' said the girl. 'I couldn't, reely. What with them booms and bangings, every word of it 'as slipped clean out of m' 'ead.'

'In that case,' said Rogers, 'I have no choice but to repeat the hinformation.' He was drawing breath to do so when his eye fell upon Joan standing beyond the open doorway. 'Miss Joan,' said he, and, rising, brought the company to attention.

'The "all clear's" gone, so if you'd like to sheer off to bed you can,' said she.

Rogers waved a hand towards the door and the staff retired thankfully.

'You don't mind if Rogers stops?' said Joan, cocking an eyebrow at Harley. 'Because he's a friend of mine. He used to bath me beautifully when I was little.'

It was with a positive twinge of jealousy that Harley greeted the old butler.

'My name's Trevelyan,' he said.

Rogers shot a glance at the artillery badge in the lapel of Harley's tunic.

'Field, sir?' he inquired.

'Heavy,' Harley replied. 'Six-inch Hows; 007 Siege Battery.'

'If one might ask the sector, sir?'

'Hébuterne.'

A warm light shone in the old man's eyes.

'My own son had the honour of being wounded at Hébuterne, sir, if you'll pardon the observation. And a very hot shop he said it was, too, sir.'

Harley nodded. 'Pretty hot now and then. Hope he's getting on all right.'

'Very nicely, sir. Lost an eye, sir, but otherwise nothing to complain of.'

'I'm going to forage for sardines,' said Joan, taking Freddie in tow.

Harley was about to follow when Rogers caught his eye meaningly.

'Excuse me, sir,' he said, 'but I was looking at Miss Joan's dress. Was it the roof?'

Harley nodded. 'I'm afraid it was. We were up there together. It isn't very healthy, is it?'

Rogers sighed heavily. 'It is not, sir; in fact, it's very worrying. I had hidden the ladder, too.'

'Of course it's no affair of mine,' said Harley; 'in fact, it's infernal cheek of me to suggest it ——'

'Suggest what, sir?'

'A padlock, Rogers, or perhaps a few screws.'

The old servant beamed upon him lovingly.

'Thank you very much, indeed, sir.'

'You see, I'm going back to-morrow,' said Harley, feeling an explanation was called for — and possibly an apology.

'It shall be done, sir.'

'Stout fellar,' said Harley, and found he was shaking hands. 'She' — he nodded in the direction Joan had taken — 'she doesn't seem to know what fear means.'

'She does not, sir.'

'And that makes a man nervous.'

Rogers looked at him in thoughtful silence. 'Have you known Miss Joan long, sir, if I may ask?'

'Long — no, you wouldn't say long.' He consulted his watch. 'Best part of an hour, I suppose.'

'Just so, sir, but it makes no difference.'

Harley laughed sheepishly. The evening had been full of embarrassing *nuances*. To avoid the old man's eyes, his glance travelled round the kitchen and came to rest on a snapshot of Joan perched against a teacup.

'That,' he said, with sudden courage and nodded towards it. 'That snapshot. It's no good to you with the original about.'

Rogers beamed paternally. One good action deserves another, and he might not have thought of screwing down the trapdoor.

'I shan't be looking if you care to slip it in your pocket,' he said.

4

With a loaf of bread, a tin of sardines, a basin half full of dripping, and cups of steaming cocoa, they sat themselves down at the kitchen table for a midnight feast.

Rogers, armed with a small leather bag that jingled suggestively, had excused himself and departed on an errand of mercy and precaution which demanded solitude, a pair of steps, and a screw-driver.

United by ties of common danger and common fellowship, they attacked the fare before them with appetite and enthusiasm.

'For the proper enjoyment of food,' said Joan, a knife in one hand, the loaf in the other, 'there's nowhere like a kitchen.'

'I agree,' said Harley, aware that mere agreement did less than justice to the state of his feelings.

'If I were not a lady,' she went on oratorically, 'I should have been a cook. Nowadays, of course, it isn't possible to be both. How do you like your dripping, Harley? You don't mind my calling you Harley — do you?'

'It would break my heart if you didn't,' he replied, and, conscious of having been overbold, took a great gulp of boiling cocoa and nearly passed out.

'If it's too hot, put it in your saucer and blow on it,' she advised. 'There, I've given you the black crust. Here, Freddie, you can cut your own.'

Freddie accepted this sisterly action without protest, but, when he had reached across for the dripping, his face fell.

'Well, really,' he complained, 'if you haven't given the beggar all the meaty juice from the bottom.'

'Certainly I have,' she retorted. 'When you start your new duties in the A.S.C., you'll get plenty of titbits, but until you do, you shan't.'

'That's right,' said Freddie; 'run down the man behind the guns. Ridicule the greater front behind the front. The fact that I've fought and bled for my England doesn't count, I suppose.'

'Freddie, darling, that isn't fair,' Joan sniggered. 'I'd love to have been with you when you were wounded. I believe it was the only time you ever stopped talking.'

'It isn't as if I did talk,' Freddie protested. 'She never gives any one a chance. Appoints herself O. i/c conversation in any company.'

He stopped abruptly, and seized the sardines.

'No, you don't, my child. That tin contains eleven Peneaus, and my share is four and his share is four and yours is three.'

Joan shook her head sadly.

'I am sorry about Freddie,' she apologised, 'but I'm afraid he'll never make a host.'

'As her idea of a host is someone who voluntarily starves himself to death, I never hope to,' he replied. 'What's more, I'm going to help myself first. So here goes.'

'From a pig one expects a grunt,' said Joan, 'and one is not disappointed.'

It was all very idiotic and facetious and typical of an age which, confronted by a greater emergency than the world had ever before experienced, never allowed itself the luxury of acting normally.

In their exchanges Joan and her brother maintained a running fire of ridicule and abuse that completely failed to disguise the true state of their affection for each other. Half jealous, wholly envious, and with a shameless disregard for war-time conventions, Harley tore down the camouflage with a single question.

'Do many brothers and sisters love each other as you do?'

Freddie's surprise was marked by a flush of angry red. Joan faced the situation with better courage.

'He's not a bad old stick, and he's leaving us to-morrow. Sorry to have given it away, though.'

And putting a hand against her brother's cheek, she cuddled his head against her side.

'Easy on,' he said, but made no real effort to escape. 'What about finishing up and going to some dance place?'

The suggestion was unheeded, doubtless because there was no chance of improving on existing conditions. Harley, too, had somehow driven away that spirit of flippancy that calls for the accompaniment of a jazz band.

'You haven't a sister, then?' she asked.

'No. You behold a poor orphan. That's what makes me grateful for cutting in with you folks to-night. It seems natural to spend the last night of one's leave this way.'

'You go back to-morrow, too?'

'Yes, the seven-forty.'

'Lots of people coming to see you off?'

'None, I imagine.'

'No girls?'

Harley shook his head and laughed.

'Not one.'

'Oh, dear,' said Joan; 'that must be remedied, mustn't it?'

'Do you mean ——' he began, and hesitated.

Something perilously like an understanding was growing between them. Something perilously sentimental. They felt it simultaneously. It was expressed in the mutual consciousness of a third party being present. Harley, even so, was powerless to resist it. For the first time in his life he was trembling on the brink of saying something tender and maudlin. Joan, as a woman, was better equipped to meet the emergency.

'I shall have to be there in any case,' she said. 'We are sending my poor brother to France for a change. He doesn't get enough to eat over here, so we are arranging for him to be fattened up at the expense of the rest of the army.'

The spell was broken — also a cocoa-cup in the rough-and-tumble that followed.

It was a very dishevelled couple who subsequently delivered up their guest to the cool and starry embraces of the night. Together they watched him go and, long after he had passed out of sight, listened to the echo of his footfalls dying away in Lansdowne Passage.

'Shall I go after him and tell him I like him?' Joan asked.

'You've done nothing else all evening,' was the insulting reply.

Joan was quite brazen. 'Good,' said she.

'Joan, I believe you're in love with the beggar.'

'I believe I could be,' she nodded.

'Why not, then? He's got bags of money.'

'Cad,' said Joan. 'Pig. You would try and spoil everything, wouldn't you?'

'Damn it,' he complained, 'what's the harm in telling you that?'

'The harm,' she retorted, 'is that I'm in the kind of mood that makes me want to cook for a man — that's what.'

And, throwing her arms round her brother's neck, she kissed him with a vehement intensity which convinced him that she was thinking of someone else.

5

Where Lansdowne Passage opens its mouth into a yawn that becomes Curzon Street, Harley Trevelyan stopped in a pool of light shed by a masked lamp-post.

His whole being was conscious of amazement and exaltation. Never before had he experienced a sensation to equal it. It was as if a thousand ports had been thrown open to admit light and air to the darkest, dullest recesses of his body and soul. He was in love, utterly, overwhelmingly.

Save for a possible glimpse of her at Victoria Station, it was unlikely they would ever meet again. That did not matter. His rapture was not to be marred or tarnished by gloomy forebodings.

The love so lightly tossed to him by the accident of an air raid would survive and outdistance any combination of disasters.

The war could break him into as many small pieces as the explosive energy of tri-nitro-toluol might command, but every one of those pieces would mount into space as a separate messenger of rejoicing.

He shook his fist at the masked lamp-post.

'A few hours ago I was like you,' he said, aloud; 'all blacked out and dim. But now!' Exultantly he beat his fists together. 'Now!'

Why had he left so soon? It was only a little after one o'clock. Why hadn't he stopped on and on and on?

Was it too late to return and demand admittance? To be ruled by convention in time of war was insanity.

He would have gone back like a shot had he felt himself capable of explanation. But he knew himself to be incapable. A man shaking from head to foot with a new-found joy like the blade of a trembler coil is in no condition to deal with explanations on a doorstep. Besides, Joan might not answer the bell. He might have Lady Miller or Rogers or Freddie to deal with. To say 'I have left my gloves behind' would be inadequate, and obviously the real motive was unexplainable.

But something would have to be done. Sleep was out of the question.

'If only the shops were open,' he lamented. 'If one could buy something.'

Better walk — walk; that was the thing to do.

It was not a bad alternative, to tramp through deserted streets in company with the realisation that was his.

With thirty-three-inch strides he set off, and the pavements rang beneath his feet. He felt that he would never again know fatigue or dullness. A new source of life had come into being within himself, divined and inspired by Joan's laughing eyes and mouth, her insolence, courage, and understanding. He could feel it bubbling within him like spring water in a pool. The exquisite refreshment was almost more than he could bear in silence.

As he tramped, he could hear it tinkling merrily beneath his feet. He had gone a hundred yards before realising that the pavements were littered with broken glass, flinders of thousands of panes blasted from windows by the shock of explosions.

At the bottom of Clarges Street a squad of L.C.C. men were busy with brooms clearing up the mess. As they swept, the glass jingled like wind bells.

He paused a moment listening to the queer rhythmic music they made. Across the way was a house in which a ray of light showed palely beneath a lowered blind.

Paula's house. And the light came from her room.

So she, too, was awake, doubtless going over and over in her mind those few crazy moments they had spent together at the Carlton. What ages ago it seemed! — so far off as to have lost reality.

A pitiful business it had been. A woman who offered and a man who could not accept. Nothing is more pitiful than that. Yet but for Paula — but for that sudden unrestraint of hers — what had happened to him since would not have been.

He owed her something for that — something transcending ordinary gratitude — and something which could never be expressed. He had run away from love only to find it. There was irony in that. What was it Browning had written?

> 'God above is great to grant us mighty to make
> And creates the love to reward the love —'

'Does He?' Harley wondered, knowing how often it was not so, yet praying that in one case at least it should prove true.

He hesitated before moving on, searching his mind for some easing, kindly thing to say to her from the pavement. But he knew he would not find it.

Seeing him below her window at that small hour, she would inevitably misunderstand his impulse.

Every lover wants his world to be happy, too, and as Harley shook his head and moved on to Piccadilly, a shadow of regret went with him.

At the corner one of the sweepers touched his cap with that gregarious impulse common to those who work late in deserted streets.

'Made a proper mess, 'aven't they?' he remarked.

Harley nodded. 'You've got your work cut out.'

'That's right,' said the man. 'I wouldn't 'arf mind bein' a glazier to-morrer — oh, dear! Eh?'

Farther along Piccadilly was a hole in the wood paving where a bomb had burst. A policeman was watching over it with an air of implacable resolution that suggested it would be no fault of his if the hole filled itself up during the night.

Harley asked if anyone had been hurt.

'It's not for me to answer that, sir, and it's not for you to arst,' was the sober reply, not unmixed with suspicion.

'Good man,' said Harley, and pursued his way across Leicester Square towards Covent Garden.

At Long Acre a barrier had been erected and fire engines were still at work. The helmets of firemen and the nozzles and unions of hoses gleamed mysteriously through misty plumes of smoke. A burst water main and a burst gas main were sending up parallel jets of fire and water. The sight had attracted a group of spectators largely composed of Covent Garden porters and aged vagrants. Carts and lorries, piled high with vegetables and boxes of flowers for the market, were huddled in Garrick Street waiting for the barriers to come down. A special constable, whom Harley recognised as a leading West End actor-manager, was endeavouring to park them in some better shape.

'Lorries on the right — horse-drawn vehicles on the left,' sounded the familiar voice. 'Now, come along, my boys, come along. What is the use of my talking if you take no notice?'

A lad of sixteen, with the frightened eyes of one in the presence of an emergency with which he found himself powerless to cope, loomed out of the mists of Floral Street and stood irresolutely before Harley, gnawing the back of his hand.

'What's the matter, sonny?' said Harley, recognising the signs of approaching panic. 'What's the trouble?'

'Donno what to do, sir. My retailer's 'as gone up — flattened out — cruel it is. Plice is burnin' still. Yesterday's onions poppin' off chestnuts. What'd I better do with that?' And he jerked his thumb towards a one-horse cart piled with wooden boxes.

'What is it? Vegetables?'

'Nar. Flars. Roses and sech-like. 'E ain't there to take 'em, see. F'roil I knows 'e may be ——' The boy's lower lip shot out suggestively.

Harley clapped a hand on his shoulder. 'Steady on, youngster,' he said. 'Don't start looking for terrors. Flowers you've got, eh?'

'Yus. 'Tain't like vegs, flars ain't. Got to sell 'em quick, ain't yer?'

Harley's eyes wandered lovingly towards the cart.

'If it's a customer you want,' he said, 'I'm your man. How much for the lot?'

'Fifteen pahund, but yer kidding.'

Harley fished three fivers from his pocket. 'Does this look like business?'

The youth eyed man and money in slow turns. 'But yer can't find no use fer all the blinking lot,' said he.

'Can't I!' was the reply. 'You don't know what I can do when the mood takes me. Freeze on to these notes and I'll tell you where to go.'

In war-time transport is transport, and the spectacle of an officer riding on a market cart was not unusual enough to attract notice.

Seated beside the boy, Harley was driven down Piccadilly and thence to Berkeley Square. 'Here we are,' he said, as they came to the Millers' house, 'and if you care to earn a couple of sovereigns for yourself, you can lend me a hand.'

It must be confessed that at first the boy entered with poor spirit and no small apprehension into the surprising business demanded of him. But later, with the realisation that he was acting in concert with a man physically superior to any policeman who might feel impelled to intervene, he embraced the spirit of the enterprise with an enthusiasm only second to Harley's. The area railings, the knocker, the piers which supported the porch, the old wrought-iron link-holder — in short, everything that could be reached from pavement to the height obtainable by standing on a man's shoulders — was festooned with roses like a decorated car in a battle of flowers.

Only one interruption distracted their operations. It came from an elderly special constable, who, to do him justice, was more occupied with surprise than fear that the law was being infracted.

'Do these decorations presage an early peace, young man, or have you and your companion taken leave of your senses?' he asked blandly.

'I can only speak for myself,' said Harley. 'The boy is sane enough.'

'Odd, very odd,' said the special.

Harley said they could do with extra help and invited assistance, but the special shook his head.

'Although,' he admitted, 'it would be pleasanter than the task that awaits me. For I am on my way to guard an electric light works from the back door of a fish shop.'

Harley tossed him a rose. 'For luck, sir.'

The old man accepted the gift gracefully.

'You would not care to tell me what all this is for?' he asked.

'A love philter,' said Harley.

'Then you will allow me to wish you the best of luck.'

6

At seven o'clock in the morning, Harley was conveyed to Victoria Station in an electric brougham which was plying for hire in Curzon Street. The owner of the brougham, a statesman of repute, was unaware of the patriotic and profitable services rendered by his chauffeur in those void-of-taxi days.

Save for an hour of fitful sleep that barely released his consciousness from its sublime altitude, Harley had not rested. What was left of the night he spent in writing and tearing up letters and poems and declarations of an ardent and emotional kind. Also he drank pints of cold water to quench the fires that consumed him. Yet, even so, his throat, as the brougham drew him silently towards the end of his leave, was dry as pumice. His eyes, too, were dry and prickly and winced at the sun which, yellow as an apricot, rolled out of the opal mists hanging over Westminster.

By a common impulse traffic and pedestrians alike seemed to be converging upon Victoria Station.

London was giving up its sons to the Butcher. What a nation of cattle they had become! Compelled by some force hidden behind the trees that masked Whitehall, they moved towards the slaughter-house with blind and passionless lack of rebellion. Here and there groups of returning soldiers, the fumes of overnight drink still upon them, lifted their voices croakingly to a fragment of song. Others walked in silence with loneliness for company — and doubts to make them grave — and memories of swift and bitter partings to torment their souls. The war had run too long a course for its devotees to take up their burden with the quickstep spirit of 1914. A 'Birds of Prey' march — something almost pathetically remote from glory it had become.

The brougham entered the station yard, and, gripping his kit, Harley jumped out. He gave ten shillings to the chauffeur, and, dodging the myrmidons of the R.T.O. who might detail him for duty on the train, mixed in the crowds that gathered before the gates to the platforms.

Despite the ever-increasing numbers, all was very quiet. A hush, the logical outcome of emotions that foreshadow parting, a failure, common to all, to find those last sublime words that shall comfort and ease and reassure, was its genesis. Assemble together all sorts and conditions of men and women minding and feeling and fearing and caring beyond reach of words, and you shall find an expression of silence not readily to be forgotten or defined.

As Harley pushed through the crowds to the gates of the platform, a woman in black, with a sable round her throat, moved forward to meet him.

'Paula,' he said, 'this is — splendid of you.' It was the barest hesitation, but too obvious to escape notice.

Her face, lit up by generous impulse and affection, chilled and darkened.

'You'd rather I hadn't come,' she said. 'I understand that.'

'No,' he began.

'We haven't so long to be together,' she said; 'don't let's shirk the truth.'

He found it hard to look at her and fumbled with a buckle of his Sam Browne belt. She went on:

'I wouldn't have come, Harley, but last night, when I reached home, there was a telegram from David. He was just sailing from Southampton.'

'I'll look after him.'

'I know you will,' she said, and gave a sudden laugh.

'Why?' he asked.

'Because I know you, Harley, and I know, because of last night, you'll do ever so much more for David than you would have done — before.'

He shook his head. It gave him a chance to look about for Joan.

'I don't admit that.'

'But you will,' she said, 'I'm sure you will. You'll feel that you must make it up to me somehow.'

He felt the blood running to his cheeks. She was right, too. A conscious determination to make it up to her that way had been in his mind when a window in Berkeley Square was thrown open and he had entered into paradise and forgetfulness. Into what base metal a man's best resolves can be transformed by a woman's intuition.

Paula was saying: 'So, you see it was all for the best. Out of my utter shamelessness I forged a shield for David.'

'I wish ——' he began.

'That I wouldn't think below the surface. I know you do, but I'm made that way, Harley, and can't help it.'

He shook his head. 'Not that, but I wish you'd spare me once in a while from feeling a cad. Last night late — I passed your house. There was a light in the window.'

'You came there on purpose — and went away?'

'Not quite. I found myself there — after the raid, it was.'

'You found yourself — it wasn't intentional?'

Every word with her led to disaster.

'No, it wasn't intentional.'

'But finding yourself there, you wanted to be kind, eh? And you funked it. Yet I'd have been satisfied with very little kindness — a homœopathic dose would have done. Why did you want to be kind?'

She was dragging the truth from him.

'Because I was happy, I suppose.'

'Happy — happy? A few hours before you'd given no signs of happiness. Why should you be happy then?

Where had you found this' — her eyes were boring into his — 'this ——' She checked herself and a hand flew up to her mouth, pressing the blood back from her lips. 'Harley, Harley — you're in love?'

'Yes,' he nodded.

She shut her eyes, swayed a little, but waved away the support he offered. Once again she laughed. 'That will give David a guardian worth having.'

'Paula.'

'Oh, good-bye,' she said, thrust him aside, and ran.

The platform gates opened, and Harley was borne in on the crest of a muddy-coloured wave of humanity.

7

He had no trouble in finding a seat for himself, but holding one for Freddie Miller was not so easy. Freddie, gambler to the backbone, took a gambler's chance in catching trains.

A bare minute before it was due to depart, he appeared, dragged along the platform by the crook of a stick held by Joan. Joan's cheeks were pink as a sunset. She wore a rose in her belt and another over her right ear.

Seeing Harley, Freddie launched a dismal howl. 'I'm trying to desert, but Joan won't let me.'

Harley cast forth an R.A.F. officer, who was zooming down into the vacant seat, and hauled Freddie into the carriage.

'Oh, Lord!' he gasped; 'they've shanghaied me, and now I shall be killed.'

An elderly major, who was snivelling behind a copy of the 'Times,' dried his tears and laughed.

A porter, or some creature destitute of decent feelings, slammed the door and cried, 'Stand away there!'

Freddie Miller was up in an instant, his kit and his flippancy vanishing in all directions.

'Joan, darling angel,' he said.

She had mounted the running-board. One leg was raised and the foot at the end of it was pressed firmly and discouragingly into the pit of the porter's stomach, who would fain have prevented her. Her face, seen in the open window-frame against the murk and steam of the grimy station, was like a near-to vision of whatever angel has been given the royal-box corner of the celestial beauty chorus.

Then the back of Freddie's ugly head eclipsed it. 'Angel, angel,' he said, kissed her, and dropped back in his seat with a hand over his eyes.

Only an instant was left. The ties wrangled and tightened. The engine chugged impressively. Joan was looking at Harley now, with eyes like stars behind a brush of rain. All the laughter of her lips was dead and laid to rest.

'My buttonhole, Harley,' she whispered; 'it was ——' then up went her voice. The porter had seized her round the waist. 'Let go, you fool; he wants one, too!'

'Let go!' Harley yelled.

Her face came up to meet his. Their mouths hovered towards each other, brushed, and were rent apart by authority in corduroys.

Like a hideous nightmare of confiscation, in which all that is best in a man's life is snatched away and cast into a bottomless sea, the small, glowing face, an instant ago so near to Harley's, diminished to a tiny pink speck upon the platform.

He did not wave farewells. His valedictory gesture was two fists brandished through the open window.

Then Freddie said, 'There's not another like her in the world.'

8

Few features of the war present a less inspiring picture than a crowded transport in a capricious sea. The wretched company was soused with spray, whipped by the lash of a salt wind, and rolled to weather and to lee. Scarcely one man in a dozen would not gladly have taken his misery to the bottom of the sea. They were tormented with sickness and yet unable to reach the ship's rails, or to practise even the most primitive avoidances.

Leaning over the rail of the upper deck, Harley surveyed the sufferers below and reflected that less than a dozen hours before he had been decorating the front of Joan's house with roses. A pretty thing in contrasts.

He turned away with a gesture of pity and disgust, to find Freddie Miller at his elbow.

'Feeling bad, old son?'

Harley shook his head. 'No. The sea doesn't take me that way. Leave has made me soft — made me notice and mind things. I must give myself a kick in the pants.'

'Yours is a minding stock, though, ain't it?'

Harley shrugged his shoulders. 'Imagination hasn't bothered me up to yet, and I don't intend to cultivate it now. It's no sort of asset in my job.'

Freddie nodded and rummaged in the pockets of his British Warm for a pipe and matches.

From his elbow came a deep rumble of protest. 'It would be prejudicial to good order and military discipline to light that pipe.'

The speaker was a Fusilier colonel, who sat upon a bulkhead hugging his belly. His face was as green as the tabs of an Intelligence Staff Officer.

'Contrary to orders, sir?' Freddie asked.

'Contrary to humanity,' was the reply; 'if you lit it I should see that you followed my breakfast into the Channel.'

Freddie laughed and pocketed the offending pipe.

'Ever do any writing nowadays?' he asked, turning to Harley again. 'I used to like the stuff you turned out when we were at the Varsity together. Had a kick in it.'

Harley shook his head. 'War's too much of an all-time job, but it's queer you should have asked, because, until now, I haven't felt I wanted to write anything.'

'Until now?'

'Yes. Wonder why? P'r'aps talking about it.'

'P'r'aps something quite different,' said Freddie.

Harley frowned and shut down. He might be prepared to share the outskirts of his thoughts with a friend, but no more than that.

Freddie Miller was not sensitive enough to be aware of such subtle restraints. He was one for crashing things out, not stifling them. A typical user-up of cash, opportunity, and confidence was Freddie Miller. His belief in the future was never so strong that he economised or saved any of the present to set aside for the morrow. 'Why not now?' was the slogan of his bright young life. It had served him well enough. There had been a crash or two, but they were insignificant, they didn't count. He had cut his knees, but never broken a leg. Like Charley's Aunt, he was still running a happy carefree blindfold race through life.

'Thank God,' he had boasted, 'I've learnt nothing from experience.'

'I say,' said Freddie, 'you went off bang with young Joan. Every shot a bull's-eye.'

'Don't be an ass,' said Harley, but there was no discord in his voice. Rather it was musical — an invitation to the waltz.

'It was that roof episode, in my opinion. Y'see, everyone else has done his damnedest to keep her off the tiles. Whereas you shot her through the star trap and followed yourself, like a pantomime fairy and the demon king. I tell you that raised your stock six points.'

'Rot,' said Harley, and wondered if there was any possible chance of getting off a marconigram to Rogers to take out those screws.

'And don't run away with the idea she's an easy girl to pass, because she isn't,' Freddie went on. 'The kind of bird she generally uncages would pass for a vulture in any aviary.'

In spite of the starch and dignity which unacknowledged love imposes on a man, Harley found himself beginning to laugh.

'Very few fellars get much more out of Joan than "How's your father?" or "Good-bye-ee."'

Hearing these magical words, Harley could not understand why everyone aboard looked so cold and miserable. For his own part he could not remember a more delightful crossing. The leaping waves that slapped and sprayed against the vessel's side were the final expression of gaiety and good spirits. The boat itself was rocking with laughter like a schoolboy at a pantomime. And what a good chap Freddie was — one in a thousand — a capital fellow! It warmed one's heart to be with him.

'Yes, I had quite a job to prevent her chasing you up Lansdowne Passage.'

'What's that?'

'Had some idea you might want to know she liked you.'

Might want to know — might want to know!

Harley swivelled round, his eyes sparking dangerously. 'And you prevented that?'

Amazing that such men as Miller were allowed to live.

'Old friend,' he answered, 'did I do wrong? I had a hunch you knew it already.'

9

By one of those queer accidents of chance, they were not destined to part at Boulogne. Freddie Miller's original posting to a divisional ammunition column had been cancelled. Instructions awaited him to report for duty to G Corps Siege Park H.Q. in the village of Pas-en-Artois.

'My lot,' said Harley, when the news was conveyed to him. 'What luck! I know the O.C. well. An Irishman with a chest like the front door of a castle and a laugh that blows out the canvas sides of an Armstrong hut. Fawlk, our O.C. at the battery, hates him from the socks up, and the dislike is reciprocated. Whenever there's a lull in the fighting, they keep themselves busy slinging stinks about each other into Heavy Artillery Headquarters.'

'Rather a nasty mess, your old man, ain't he?'

'He's a bit of a tom cat,' Harley allowed. 'Spits — scratches and arches his back. Suffers badly from the disease of breaking N.C.O.s. Makes a hobby of it. I've liked men better.'

'Windy?' That question was inevitable.

Harley shook his head. 'No. Has a queer kind of courage of his own. Keen on highbrow literature and modern painting. You know, Nevinson and the French extremists. When we're getting plastered, he never leaves off talking about 'em. Always stresses one word more than another in a sentence. "Cézanne is a very great *man* — a very great *man*" — like that.'

'Sounds a dream to me,' said Freddie.

'I get on well enough with him because I've looked at pictures a bit and read more than the average. He does not like me, but I'm useful. I act as a sort of go-between. The other officers and the men boil up inside every time he gives an order, but somehow I manage to keep the peace and make 'em happy.'

They had reached the station and mingled with a crowd gathered round one of the platform barriers. An R.T.O. was issuing orders through a megaphone in a voice that suggested strong disapproval of everybody except himself.

'Saint-Pol and Arras train leaving from number *two*. Officers in *front*. Men at the back.'

Not without a struggle they secured a couple of seats in the remnant of a first-class carriage. The cushions had long since vanished, leaving nothing to sit upon but a criss-cross of sagged webbing that afforded free access to the chilly blasts that penetrated the ill-fitting doors. Save in a single instance every pane of window glass was broken. As they drew out of the station, a sleety drizzle drifted in on their faces and knees.

'One thing about this kind of accommodation,' said the irrepressible Freddie, 'is that one gets it coming and going. One's treated alike at both ends.'

Divorced from any kind of comfort or convenience, the train pursued its slothful course through a countryside from which every element of beauty had been obliterated by recurrent harvests of horse lines, hutments, latrines, ammunition, and R.E. dumps, lorry parks, and intensive training areas. The whole landscape of that greater front behind the front was pimpled by a grey rash of war material, rendered the more unlovely by a quality of tidiness and order contrary to every law of nature in the wild.

An eternity seemed to pass before the train clanked into the unlighted station of Saint-Pol and came jarringly to rest.

'All out! All out!'

Cold, stiff, and miserable, they were glad enough to obey the order.

The majority of officers and men were herded into another train bound for Béthune. Harley was told there would be no service to Arras that night, but a train left for Doullens about 3 A.M. He looked at his watch. It was barely nine o'clock.

A staff major bound for Avesnes le Comte, who had shared their journey from Boulogne, suggested something to eat at Écu de France.

Freddie thought the idea very sound, but Harley shook his head. Something was pricking him to get back to work. He had never been able to capture the casual attitude towards the war exhibited by so many of its votaries. Once in France, a continual spur was in his flanks to get on with it and get it done. He could forgive a man being afraid, but lassitude he never forgave.

'Let's roll round to the ammunition siding,' he suggested; 'might get a lorry hop if we're lucky.'

They were lucky. A divisional ammunition column was leaving for Arras.

There were always a few odd blankets to be found inside a D.A.C. lorry. Also other comforts not strictly specified in the G 1098 of that unit. A Primus stove, a tin of cocoa and milk, and a spot of rum.

A very snug little kitchen was made between the eighteen-pounder ammunition boxes and they got things nicely heated up before getting under way. Even an A.S.C. officer, who of all branches of the service has the greatest contempt for high explosives, discourages a naked light in a moving lorry. Naturally he uses his own discretion in regard to regulations, but every now and then some of them appear reasonable. Of course a cigarette or a pipe is quite a different matter.

Their host was a cherubic second lieutenant of cheerful disposition. As to which, why not, having regard to his fortunate situation? He was young and he sang, and he was confessedly and genuinely sorry for the P.B.I.

'What I say is that we ought to have a go at things in rotation,' said he. 'I'm trying now to get a shift into Tanks, but I'm afraid they love me too well.'

Speaking of love inspired him to confide to Freddie that he had become a victim of that gentle emotion.

'She's in a show in town and, though I say it, has a real artistic temperament.'

'Good egg,' said Freddie.

'Yes and no,' the youthful Romeo replied; 'for the trouble is I haven't. She expects me to write her wonderful letters and that's where I fall down. I was trying just before you two fellows showed up, but the result was horrid. That's the worst of a commercial training. Stifles the artistic temperament.'

'You should get Trevelyan here to give you a hand. He's a writer by trade when gunning allows,' said Freddie.

'I say that 'ud be marvellous, though,' said the boy, unconscious of anything ridiculous in the suggestion. 'If you would, sir.'

Harley stifled an inclination to laugh. 'But I don't know the girl,' he protested.

'That don't matter. What she craves for is real feeling. Now, look here' — and he fished a field service pocketbook from his trench coat — 'any idiot would realise that the kind of stuff I've written would put a girl clean off. Wait till I get a torch.'

By the light of an electric torch, Harley found himself reading the boy's composition. There was something almost fragrant in its naïveté. One sentence referred to her 'esteemed embraces.'

'I'd send it — it's you,' said Harley.

The boy shook his head. 'Not it. I know her. Be a sport, sir; write me something that'll make her sit up. I'll tote along in one of the other lorries and give you a chance.'

Thrusting the book and the torch into Harley's hands, he dropped over the tailboard and vanished into the night. Freddie, with that suddenness that distinguished all his actions, had gone peacefully to sleep. One could not laugh at a joke like that alone — besides, the boy had been sincere. Like a million others on the threshold of emotion, he had found himself paralysed into silence.

Harley tucked the clip of the torch into the buttonhole of his lapel and began to write.

I'm sitting on an ammunition box in a lorry jogging down a long straight road from somewhere to the war.

Through the canvas cover across the night I can see the yellow lights of other lorries — that look like a string of little suns vanishing into the distance. But I begin to believe that there is no distance ——

'Oh, rot!' said Harley, ripped out the sheet of squared paper, and started afresh.

I love you. Does it matter? I love you — let it matter. I love you — in charity make it matter. I love you — love you — love you.

He did not notice a figure scrambling over the tailboard, until a voice eagerly inquired, 'How are you getting on?'

'I'm not.'

The book and the light were snatched away.

'I say, that's just what I've been trying to say,' crowed the boy exultantly.

And so it befell that Harley's first love letter to Joan was delivered into the hands of another woman.

10

At an ammunition dump behind Arras, fragrant with the smell of stale tear gas, they bade farewell to young Romeo and decanted themselves into another lorry, returning empty to the railhead at Mondicourt. The night sky flickered with gun-flashes or glowed whitely under the luminous rays of Véry lights. The Western Front throbbed with the many voices of war, the cough and grunt of heavies, the bark of field artillery, the stinging crack of sixty-pounders, and the chatter of machine guns.

Divorced from active service for long and dreary months, the sights and the sounds about him were a tonic to Freddie Miller.

They had crammed themselves onto the front seat beside the driver, a phlegmatic and broad-beamed Lancastrian, to whom Freddie found it impossible to communicate the martial rapture that possessed his soul. Harley, occupied with his own thoughts, proved a dull companion.

'Too many closed windows for too long, that's been my trouble,' crowed Freddie, and pointed at the skeleton of a house with perforated walls. 'This German system of ventilation is excellent. Hullo, there!'

With a sorrowing whine a shell drifted over their heads and detonated two hundred yards away.

'Intelligence work above the average. They know I'm back already. What kind of stuff was that?'

'Naval, probably. Base fuse. Firing at about twenty-eight thousand,' Harley replied.

At the sound of the approaching shell, he had involuntarily flinched. Leave had made him soft with a vengeance. It was a new experience, and he felt disgusted and rather depressed.

More shells sailed over, to burst harmlessly in the fields. The German gunners were feeling for the road — the straight white road that stretches from Arras to Doullens like a chalk-line ruled across the countryside.

To distract his mind, Harley began to repeat a jingle he had sometime invented.

'A ribbon white it stretches far
From lands of peace to fields of war,
  The Arras–Doullens Road.
And all night long both to and fro
The endless streams of transport flow,
The endless tides of soldiers go
  Along the Arras–Doullens Road.'

Freddie Miller picked up the words and found a jazz tune to go with them. After that he sang continuously.

'Any more?' he demanded.

'Something about this place Labray, but I forget it.'

So Freddie improvised — inspired by tufty shrapnel bursts.

'And farther up, so people say,
You'll see the woolly bears at play
Upon the house-tops of Labray,
Upon the Arras–Doullens Road.'

Labray proved rather a hot corner. Miscellaneous stuff was flying about as they bumped over the cobbles of the village street. After that, things were quiet, but livened up again a few miles on at the Bae de Sud. A gun team had suffered a direct hit and the road was messy. Also the lilac-sweet odour of gas hung in the air.

'Want any help?' Harley inquired.

A second lieutenant in charge shook his head. 'Those of us who weren't hit don't want it, and the others are past it. You haven't a spot of whiskey?'

Harley had.

'Thanks. Had to shoot a couple of horses and, you know, they were friends of mine.' He handed back the flask. 'Thanks! saved my life. Wouldn't hang about here if I were you. 'Tisn't a health resort.'

It wasn't. Something hit the bank on the roadside, but failed to explode. If it had!

The lorry driver was putting a match to his side-lamps. Up to then they had driven without lights. The Bae de Sud was the last place on the road troubled by anything but long-range stuff.

They went on, passing a flying-ground on their right down an avenue of unbroken trees.

That mess at the crossroads had quieted Freddie Miller. He was thinking of three silent figures lying with their greatcoats covering their heads.

'Death wouldn't matter so much,' he said, 'if it wasn't that one was missing all the fun.'

At Mondicourt they dropped off and searched the ammunition siding for another lift. Unavailingly. All the battery lorries had loaded up. The siding was deserted.

Freddie deposited his valise in a shed and they foot-slogged through the intricate little village street and thence downhill to Pas.

They reached it at three o'clock. A long procession of lorries were parking for the night. A farmhouse standing back from the road was their destination. A dozen motor-cycles were leaning against the mud walls. A sleepy sentry challenged them yawningly and passed them as friends into the courtyard.

In answer to their knock a mighty voice bade them enter.

The orderly room of G Corps Siege Park was a barren apartment boasting a couple of office tables for the use of the O.C. and his adjutant. In one corner was a small telephonic exchange.

Seated in a large Louis XVI chair tilted back to a perilous angle was an enormous man wearing a British warm, and blue-and-white striped pyjama legs reposed conspicuously upon the table. Upon his feet were a pair of pink woollen slippers which looked like the kind usually worn by babies, but magnified out of all reasonable proportions. The head of a laughing schoolboy was perched upon shoulders that seemed too broad to pass through any average-sized door.

There was nothing formal in the military sense of the word about Major Cosmo Regan, O.C., G Corps Siege Park. He treated officers and men alike with imperishable good humour and understanding. But he made them work. Complaints from higher up as to his manner of making them work were frequent and bitter, but Regan cared little for that.

'Phwat the divil would I mind!' he roared, as he tossed screed after screed into the oil drum that served as a paper basket. 'Life isn't so sure or so pleasant out here that one can afford to trate human beings like machines. They'll do their work none the less well for being happy.'

Recognising Harley, Regan launched a yell of welcome that roused a sleeping signaller to unwilling wakefulness.

'And phwat's the maning of this?' he cried. 'Have ye desarted or has the battery run out of Scotch?'

Harley explained that he was just back from leave.

Leave, was it? Regan had forgotten the meaning of the word. Was anything amiss with the idea of a drink? Nothing was. And maybe a snack of bread and cheese and Worcester sauce to go with it? Excellent.

'Orderly!' shouted Regan, and an orderly blundered in from an adjoining room.

The orderly knew by instinct what was required of him.

'Who's your friend?' Regan demanded.

Freddie explained himself and presented his posting orders. Regan appraised him with a not unfavourable eye and studied the chit that set forth Freddie's previous war record.

'D'ye know anything about transport work?'

'Nothing at all, sir.'

'Good,' said Regan. 'For the stuff they tache to the transport officers back at home is about as useful as a spint bullet. Begob, I've had them reporting here in the innocent belafe they were going to take part in a cross betwane a Lord Mayor's show and the Canterbury Pageant. Ye'll be attached to Wodehouse's column. Nine-point two's. 008 S.B.A.C. Wodehouse is none so bad — but racintly married. Rint away from his wife's embraces on the farst day of their honeymoon. Made him windy, it has, and shmall wonder. I tell him he's got eyes like mistletoe.'

'008,' Harley repeated. 'They still in the same position? That's about a hundred yards south of our battery.'

'Sure it's in the same place, and if Miller isn't eaten up by his own caterpillars, ye'll be able to take a dose of gas togither any quiet night. B' the way, I sint up a new second loot to your show this avening. Drayton — David Drayton, with the mother's milk shtill upon his lips.'

Harley finished his drink and nodded at Freddie. 'Paula's brother,' said he, and rose.

Already a hint of dawn showed above the tree-clad brow of the hill.

'I must be getting on, sir, if I'm to make it before daylight.'

'Wait a bit and I'll sind ye up in one of the workshop cars. Orderly. Workshop Vauxhall.'

A few minutes later, the sound of an engine spitting discontentedly was heard in the yard outside.

Regan in his monstrous pink slippers stood at the door and waved farewell. Freddie Miller jumped onto the running-board for a final handshake.

'A grand fellar that,' said he, 'and you, too, old chap. God bless.'

He stood watching the headlights of the car vanish into the trees that mantled the hillside.

II

The Vauxhall ran past the old mill at Hénu as the fifteen-inch gun, which there abided, loosed off its final round and sheeted down for the night. At Sailly au Bois it was light enough to see the shapes of the houses and the broken ribs of the church steeple against the greying sky.

As they lipped over the breast of the hill, the car's speed increased, for the road which ran from Sailly to the tortured village of Hébuterne was not of a kind to encourage lingering. It was, in fact, an unhealthy road, being exposed to direct observation and shell fire from a wide arc of the enemy's front. The car leapt and bounded over the spongy surface, dodging or tracking shell holes and avoiding the ditches which yawned on either side.

The silhouette of the outskirts of Hébuterne had undergone material changes during Harley's absence on leave. Several of the tall trees at Windy Corner had been bitten off short. The building which had stood on the left of the crossroad had become a heap of potential road metal.

'This'll do,' said Harley; 'you'll find it a job to turn if you come up the lane.' He gripped his belongings and jumped out. 'Good-night.'

Harley wallowed through the mud of a sunken lane and, parting the gas blanket at the mouth of the B.C. dugout, descended slippery steps and was home.

Hammersley, the officer on duty, rose from an ammunition case and extended a hand of welcome.

'Lordy, Trevelyan, but it's good to see you,' he said. 'Things without you haven't been the same.'

'Too much work?'

'Plenty, but that isn't the trouble. It's the old man.'

'A bit edgy, eh?'

'Edgy, my dear fellar? Duodenal — there's no other word for it — positively and absolutely duodenal. See any of the new shows in town?'

'A few,' said Harley. 'Talk about 'em to-morrow. I'll turn in for a bit. Did young Drayton report?'

'Yes. I've shoved him in your dugout. A nice kid — if a spot green and milky. The old man squished some vinegar in his eye and told him he had everything to learn. 'Night, 'night, and don't get killed trotting along.'

'Try not,' said Harley. 'G'night.'

Mounting the steps, he made for his own quarters fifty yards away — the cellar of a house that was no more.

His batman, anticipating his return, was up, and had a tin cup of blue and treacly tea awaiting him.

'Nice time, sir?'

'Fine,' said Harley. 'Give these boots a pull and that'll be all. Don't want to wake up the others.'

When the batman had gone, he walked across to the bunks where two other officers were sleeping. In the lower bunk lay young David Drayton with his head upon a crooked arm. Harley thought, 'Looks about sixteen — a damn shame, really.'

The sleeping boy sighed and moistened his lips poutingly as a child might have done.

'Too young to be in a show like this.'

The face was like an unwritten page.

Harley fell asleep and was on the roof with Joan beside him — Joan with her curling mouth — why, her face was all curls — curling upward to meet his.

12

Harley rolled over on his elbow and stared about him. It was hard, on waking, to realise one was back at the front.

At the foot of the camp bed, with the large, admiring eyes of boyhood focussed upon his hero, stood David Drayton.

'Hullo, sir. You awake?'

Harley blinked, rubbed the stiffness out of his face, and said he supposed so — that he was glad to see David, but not being a field officer was unprepared to be addressed as 'sir.' 'You juggins.'

'Mayn't I call you "sir"?'

'Unless you want to earn a tick-off for the pair of us.'

David grinned sheepishly.

'What do you think of the war?'

'Fine.' The enthusiasm was very genuine. 'Fine. I arrived about eight last night and the guns were popping away like mad. I've never been tight, but it made me feel as if I was. Awfully queer feeling — as if one's legs didn't belong.'

Harley nodded. He recognised that exhilaration well enough. A grand sensation while it lasts — which isn't long.

'Stick out your head and raise a shout for Lane, like a good chap,' he said. 'I'm going to get up and shave.'

Lane arrived with hot water and more tea, also a rasher of bacon with a wash of tinned tomato over it.

David watched while Harley shaved and dressed and consumed his modest breakfast. His whole attention seemed absorbed by Harley's exquisite performance of these everyday functions.

Such devotion, though flattering, was an embarrassment.

'Haven't they given you a job?' Harley asked.

'Not yet. I had a look at the guns, but that was about all. I say, it sounds an ass of a question, but what does one do?'

Harley finished his tea and pushed away the cup.

'Largely nothing,' he replied. 'Nothing interspersed with visits to the O. Pip and periodical shooting programmes.' Once more he had detected a look of bewilderment on the boy's face. 'O. Pip, if that's what's worrying you,' he went on, 'stands for observation post. Which is sometimes in a front trench and sometimes beyond it, and sometimes up a tree and sometimes in a hole. One sees life and other things from an O. Pip and reports accordingly.'

'Look, I haven't thanked you yet for getting me posted here.'

'I was glad they let us have you.'

'But I'm tremendously grateful, Trevelyan. You don't know what a difference it's made to — to Paula.'

'Ah,' said Harley, got up and trussed himself into his Sam Browne belt.

'I expect you saw a lot of each other on your leave.'

'Here and there. Now and then.'

'I — I wonder if you've guessed anything about Paula?'

Harley clapped on his tin hat with an air of finality. 'I guessed she was fond of you.'

'Of me,' the boy repeated.

'Just so, and that's as far as guessing is likely to carry me.'

Shooting a smile at David that seemed to say, 'If you speak another word, I'll shove your head in a bucket,' he went out.

13

Major Evan Fawlk, O.C., 007 Siege Battery, had arrived at number three gun and was dripping upon its crew that particular blend of vitriol and venom which nature had designed him to exude.

It was a remarkable feature of the man that in a period of history conspicuous for its outspokenness, he never swore or used an ugly word. It is less remarkable that this characteristic earned for him universal hatred from officers and other ranks.

He had a tall body, wide shoulders, and a cavernous chest. His head, on its long, stringy neck, projected away from his body and traversed ceaselessly from side to side in a way that made one think of panthers in a cage. His indigo eyes were deep-set, and so close together that they seemed to be trying to bore through the sides of his nose and become one. In contrast to the leanness of his face, his brow was contoured with two islands of super-orbital fat. He had high cheek-bones with cavities between them and a large bony jaw. His mouth was wide and straight, with thin lips fitting as tightly together as the sides of a cigarette-case. At the end of unusually long arms were the delicate hands of an artist.

He was reputed to have spent his earlier years abroad, and it was hard to mention any part of Africa with which he was not familiar. Although less than forty years of age, he had amassed a lot of money. His tastes were ascetic. He loved music, literature, painting. His conceit was abnormal, and if he seldom, if ever, talked about himself, it was because he seldom, if ever, encountered anyone worthy, in his opinion, to discuss himself with. The possession of power was to Fawlk the breath of life. He battened upon power. To give an order and see it obeyed was luxury to him rather than a matter of routine. He felt that every shell flung from the gaping mouths of the four six-inch Mark 7 howitzers under his command was an individual expression of his own power. A remorseless critic of other men, he could not tolerate even the slightest adversity of opinion in regard to his own character and conduct. It is doubtful whether on the whole Western Front there was a more friendless man or any man less ambitious of friendship.

The offence which his roving eye had detected on this occasion was a pyramid of shells which, owing to a rain-induced subsidence of the ground, had tilted off the perpendicular. Before him was a flushing second lieutenant, Mr. Frost, standing to attention with his round balloon-like cheeks inflated with suppressed mutiny and imprecation. That N.C.O.s and other ranks were within hearing of the calling down Frost was receiving did not in any way mitigate the flow.

'An officer who is content with such slipshodness is obviously inefficient — unfit to hold a commissioned rank.'

'I had given orders, sir, for the shells to be repiled.'

The words were blown out of the boy's mouth by the violent propellant of injustice.

'Come *here*, Mr. Frost.'

Beckoned aside, the boy followed. 'Address me in that fashion *again* and you will be sent to the *base*. And in the future command the *colour* in your cheeks or you may find yourself under *arrest*. That will *do*. Dismiss! but *remember*.'

He turned aside, saw Harley, and accepted his salute with a flick of the finger.

''Morning, sir.'

'Good-morning, Trevelyan. You were responsible for Drayton's posting, were you not?'

'In a way, sir.'

'But *why?* That kind of material is no good to us.'

'He'll shape, sir.'

Major Fawlk shrugged his shoulders. Harley Trevelyan was the one officer in the battery allowed to express an opinion. In their earlier association Fawlk had tried his intimidating methods on Harley without success. Harley stood his ground and the stuff went by unheeded. His efficiency, thoroughness, and conscientiousness were never in doubt. It was useless to try to haze an officer whose courage was mental as well as physical.

'I hope you may be right,' said Fawlk, and turned the subject. 'Did you look at those Manets?'

Harley nodded. 'Yes,' he replied. 'They are good. Very deliberate.'

'Deliberate, yes — not a bad word — though ruthless would be better. A breakaway from the soft sawder of the Victorians.'

A shell whined over and crumped a hundred yards beyond number one. Fawlk did not waste a glance in its direction.

'Manet was ahead of his time — a pioneer. I decided that years ago from a picture "Déjeuner à l'herbe" — men in silk hats and girls bathing. A very insolent conception.'

Another shell burst nearer, and opposite number four. Then two more.

High overhead circled a hostile plane framed in a spandrel of tufty shrapnel that looked like bits of cotton wool.

Fawlk beckoned to the B.S.M. 'Order your men below, Sergeant Major.'

The B.S.M. saluted and sounded three blasts on his whistle. Men ran.

Presently only Harley and Fawlk were left aboveground.

'Van Gogh is another, but who has ever heard of him? The nation has been fed on a pabulum of sugar and sunsets.'

Apparently the plane overhead was satisfied with the bracketing shots and signalled for a more liberal diet. Half a dozen German batteries started to plaster an acre of bare countryside with thunderous energy. Clods of earth and great mushrooms of yellow smoke spun and whirled in the air.

Leaning against a wheel of number four, Fawlk surveyed the bombardment with cynical interest.

'Fourth day running they've done this,' said he. 'Bad observation. That fellow' — he pointed with his cane to the sky — 'ought to be broken. After this we are sure to get a target. We'll move along to the B.C. post.'

The walk took them fifty paces nearer to where shells were bursting. But Fawlk did not hurry on that account.

'Vuillard,' he said. 'Have you ever seen a Vuillard? A distinctive stylist. Great simplicity, a negation of detail.'

Then a shell falling short buried itself in the road twenty yards behind them, burst upwards with a savage roar, and filled the air with fragments of shrieking metal.

Fawlk turned and looked at Harley, as who should say, 'Still alive?'

'No,' said Harley, 'I've never seen a Vuillard.'

Something approaching laughter was in Fawlk's eyes as they descended the dugout steps together.

14

Three nights after Harley's return from England, there occurred one of those mishaps which attended even the non-militant branches of His Majesty's Expeditionary Force. The O. i/c 007 Siege Battery ammunition column, a faithful and conscientious youth, in company with a lorry loaded with fifty rounds of Pip X, made an exit from this world in one swift upward flight. There being no remains, there was no burial. A large hole in the road east of Sailly au Bois was obligingly filled in by the R.E.s and traffic proceeded as usual.

Major Fawlk, who had a theory, not entirely borne out by the casualty lists, that no one in the A.S.C. was ever killed, indited a letter to Siege Park Headquarters, stating that in no circumstances would he accept the services of the second officer as O. i/c column.

Major Regan, replying, told him to mind his own business, which was surely as much as he would be expected efficiently to do. He referred him to the fact that the administration of transport problems was no part of a battery commander's duties. Until such a time as another officer could be posted — if ever — the second officer would be in charge.

Major Fawlk thereupon sent the correspondence with a covering chit to Heavy Artillery.

Heavy Artillery used it to stuff a hole in an Armstrong hut.

Second Lieutenant H. T. Wardley, the second column officer, lamenting the loss of his senior, but rejoicing in what was tantamount to promotion, removed the governors from the engines of four of his lorries to form a flying squad, and two days later was placed under open arrest by an A.P.M. for doing thirty miles an hour on a one-way traffic system with the arrows against him. Thanks to Regan, a court martial was avoided, but something had to be done. Wardley collected for himself three tick-offs — one from Regan, one from the S.M.T.O., and a third at Corps, which started at noon, paused for the luncheon recess, and proceeded with renewed vigour at 2 P.M. What was left of him returned in low gear on a motor-cycle.

Major Fawlk reopened the attack, and this time Heavies backed him up.

It was impossible, he wrote, that the ammunition and supplies of his battery should depend upon the services of such an officer as Wardley.

No available reinforcements being on hand, Regan was reluctantly obliged to withdraw an officer from another column. That he hit upon Freddie Miller was not because he had detected particular brilliance for transport work in that young man, but because he conceived him to be of a disposition such as would 'turn that damned pussy cat Fawlk scranny.'

'Besides,' said he, when advising Freddie of his new posting, 'ye'll have a friend at court in Trevelyan, and ye've too much sinse to make a mess of the job.'

Glad of heart, Freddie Miller returned to his own lines to tell the melancholy Wodehouse that they were to be parted. Brooding upon his domestic sorrows and severance from his adored bride, Wodehouse received the tidings phlegmatically.

'I never get anything or anyone I'm allowed to keep,' he sighed. 'My wife and I hadn't been married twelve hours when I was ordered abroad.'

So Freddie shifted his kit to a comfortable little hut that the deceased O. i/c 007 S.B.A.C. had built out of wood and canvas scrounged by night from an R.E. dump. Here he found a sullen and dejected Wardley willing and anxious to die, but determined first to make himself a thorough nuisance to his new senior.

Freddie produced a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. Wardley shook his head.

'I have no wish to drink with you or to talk to you,' he said.

'But you're going to do both,' said Freddie.

In the horse-play that followed, the foundations of the hut gave way. It heeled over and rolled down a road bank. Locked in each other's arms and in a chaos of match-boarding canvas, folding beds, boots, tins, and other impedimenta of active service, the two enveloped young men went with it.

The best of friends they subsequently emerged by way of the roof.

15

Regan's pious hope that the new column officer would prove a thorn in Fawlk's flesh was doomed to disappointment. Finding out at their first meeting that Freddie was a son of Sir Balliol Miller and a brother of the lovely Joan, Fawlk extended himself in the direction of amiability. He described Freddie as an agreeable and capable young man and observed that he had had the honour of meeting Sir Balliol in Kenya and Joan in London. He went to the length of laughing quite openly at some of Freddie's anecdotes. It was the first time in the history of the battery that Fawlk had joined in a general laugh.

Although not without appreciation for humour, his practice in the presence of wit or a jest was to assume an expression of reprobation and disapproval and then secretly to retire and laugh by himself. In the opinion of his subordinates, this secret laughter was worse than solitary drinking. There was something very ungenerous and sinister about it.

But at Freddie's jokes he laughed outright; also he said, 'That's very *amusing*, very amusing *indeed*.'

To Harley, who had accompanied Freddie back to where the unloaded lorries and their drivers impatiently awaited orders to return, Freddie said, 'Appears to me you've given your old man a needlessly sour press. He seems a genial sort of bloke.'

'He certainly blossomed out to-night,' Harley agreed. Then, more tentatively, 'Any news from — home?'

Freddie slapped his tin hat. 'There! Clean forgot! Had a letter from Joan this morning. Message in it for you, too.'

Harley tried to make his voice sound natural. 'Oh! Yes, well?'

'Can't make head or tail of it myself. P'r'aps you are brighter. Here!' He fished a letter from his pocket, switched on his torch and pointed.

In a bold large hand were the written words ——

'Tell your friend I was just as disappointed as he looked.'

Harley's heart thumped extravagantly. In the two brief snatches of time he had spent with Joan there was only one disappointment. A life-saving, soul-starving porter was responsible for that.

He managed to say, 'Queer. I wonder what she *did* mean?'

'Don't ask me,' Freddie replied; then to his sergeant, 'All right, Sergeant, cast off.'

'Beg your pardon, sir, but they're shelling very 'ot at the crostroads.'

'If you can suggest any way to stop 'em, I'll try it,' said Freddie, 'but if not, we'll get under way. 'Night, 'night, old son.'

By the intermittent flash of gun-fire and the white glow of star shells Harley watched six dark shapes rumble down the lane, turn at Windy Corner, and string themselves out across the plain. He returned slowly to the B.C. dugout.

'Old man wants you in his quarters,' said Hammersley. 'The new T.O. is knock-out.'

Fawlk was sitting on his camp bed with a copy of an illustrated paper on his knees and a whiskey-and-water within reach.

'You sent for me, sir?'

'For a chat, Trevelyan, yes, an informal chat. It's pleasant sometimes to shelve one's duty and relax. Help yourself to some whiskey.'

With the toe of his boot he thrust a wooden case towards Harley and waited until he had seated himself before speaking again.

'So you think young Drayton will make good?'

Harley nodded. 'I don't see why not.'

'I have been rather puzzled why you should have exerted yourself to get him posted to us. A friend of the family — but that was such a slender pretext.'

Harley felt his cheeks beginning to warm.

'Now, now, don't take offence, Trevelyan. A harmless jest — a shot in the dark, that's all.'

'I don't understand, sir.'

Fawlk's mouth relaxed into one of its catlike smiles. 'You should take me into your confidence, Trevelyan. It is the duty of an officer commanding to know *all* the whys and wherefores.'

'Certainly,' said Harley, short as a biscuit.

'I had a chat with Drayton this evening, quite a chat. You have a sincere admirer in that boy — very sincere. It seems, too, that he is not the only member of his family whose admiration you have captured. Eh?'

Harley lit a cigarette and stared hard.

'He showed me his sister's portrait. A very lovely woman. Am I to be allowed to congratulate you, Trevelyan? H'm?'

'No,' said Harley. 'No, sir, you are not.'

Fawlk leaned back against the stone walls of the cellar, hugged his knees, and laughed thinly. The open periodical had tilted forward and lay against his chest.

'If you choose to be reticent, you have every right,' he allowed. 'Yet out here, divorced as we are from all that is tender, fragrant, and sensuous, I cannot choose but feel some relaxation of reticence is excusable.'

Harley made no answer, and Fawlk changed the subject.

'An amusing fellow, young Miller. Quite amusing. Know him well?'

'We were at Magdalen together.'

'I met his father two or three times — in business. A very influential man on the East Coast — coffee and other things. You have met him?'

'Once, I believe — May week — years ago.'

'And the rest of the family?'

'Er — slightly.'

With every word he spoke, Harley was putting himself as far as possible from the subject under discussion. 'The mother and the sister, eh?'

Harley's nod was not enough to shake the long ash from his cigarette.

'I once had the pleasure of meeting her — at a dance.'

Harley, whose leg was beginning to swing, said, 'Did you?'

'My dear Trevelyan,' Fawlk protested. '"Did you" is surely inadequate? Have you no eyes — no memory — or has love made you blind?'

'What do you mean, sir?'

'That whatever a man might feel for another woman, he could not fail to admit that Joan Miller is the most exquisite girl ever created. Here' — and he extended the periodical at the length of his arm, revealing a full-page portrait of Joan. 'Can you conceive a more perfect body — a lovelier face than that?'

Harley did not trust himself to reply. His hands knotted into fists were thumping against the sides of the box upon which he sat.

'I have travelled in too many corners of this earth and seen too wide a pageant of beauty to be lightly susceptible to external charms, but the moment I saw Joan Miller and held her in my arms for one tragically brief waltz — Weber's "L'Invitation" — I said to myself, this is the apotheosis — the epitome of perfect womanhood.'

Taking from his pocket a small knife, he neatly cut the picture from the paper and skewered it with the blade to the brickwork beside his bed. He was so occupied by this amorous task that its reaction upon Harley escaped his notice. Harley had risen and was standing erect and rigid, breathing through his nose.

'I am sorry, sir,' he said, 'but I must ask you to take that down.'

Fawlk's eyes narrowed to slits. 'What did you say?'

'I ask you to take that down,' Harley repeated.

'Trevelyan, you are forgetting yourself.'

'On the contrary, sir, I am remembering what you are doing with the picture of a friend of mine, who, I am damn sure, would have no wish for it to hang above your bed. There are plenty of Raphael Kirchner girls and outer covers of "Vie Parisiennes" which'll serve that purpose — but not ——'

He did not trust himself to utter Joan's name, but, taking a step forward, he ripped the picture from the wall, tore it in fragments, and stuffed them in his pocket.

Fawlk did not move. With half-closed eyes and still as a crouching cat, he watched this amazing conduct in silence. There was, of course, only one explanation for Harley's action and that the least acceptable of all.

'Captain Trevelyan,' he said, choosing his words like a jeweller matching pearls for a string, 'you may count yourself fortunate that no one besides ourselves was present to witness this unfortunate display. In civilian life I should know how to act. In the present circumstances I can only wish you good-night and better manners.'

Harley saluted and went out.

For perhaps five minutes, Fawlk sat on the bed slowly tapping his teeth with a finger-nail. Then he picked up the telephone to the B.C. dugout.

'Send Mr. Drayton to me.'

What he said to David took a long time. His attitude throughout the interview was benign and fatherly.

'But you should *make* sure, my boy — you should be accurate before spreading rumours about these affairs. You must remember women are imaginative creatures — they assume a great deal more than has actually been said.'

When he was allowed to go, David Drayton stood at the top of the cellar steps and gulped and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand.

'It'll break her heart. It's a bloody shame. I know he's in love with her.'

Down below Fawlk was writing a letter to Sir Balliol Miller.

—— delighted to have your son as my column officer — very capable — has a friend here in Captain Trevelyan — no doubt you met Trevelyan on his last leave, if his time was not too heavily occupied with the sister of another of my officers. In these curiously emotional times it is hard to keep track of the many romances with which one is surrounded. I hope to be allowed to present myself when next on leave. A letter from a friend on the East Coast has advised Tanyka Land Developments and — from personal experience — I know it to be sound ——

And so on.

There was a smile of satisfaction at the corners of his thin mouth as he sealed the envelope and affixed the censorship stamp.

16

David Drayton did not return to the dugout which he shared with Harley. Late as was the hour, he slouched miserably up and down the battery position, cursing the restraint that held him in France when every loyal and devoted instinct urged him to be with Paula.

There was not in all the world a woman like Paula. She had been the core and centre of his existence. In his young and ardent imagination she supplied every demand. She was mother, sister, sweetheart — everything. There was no sacrifice he was not willing to make for her sake — or the sake of her happiness.

That her love for any man should not be returned was unbearable — unthinkable. Harley couldn't know — he couldn't.

David clenched his hands in impatient wretchedness. 'If only I could talk to her — now — now.'

What was it the O.C. had said to him — 'another interest — intimately related to our new column officer.' That meant some other girl.

'And I'll bet she's cheap, too — I'll bet she's cheap,' he said, aloud.

A tall figure loomed out of the shroud of night. It was Hammersley.

'What's the strafe?' he asked, with humorous kindliness. 'Talking to yourself and all! Gone ga-ga or something?'

'It's nothing, Hammersley.'

'Then I'd go to bed. You're for O. Pip at five and the night is using itself up fast.'

David slunk away. He undressed by the light of a torch. Harley was lying with his face to the wall asleep, or pretending to be asleep.

David thought, 'If I could wake him — make him say it isn't true — that there *is* no one but Paula.'

But one couldn't do that — not now. Out here everything was different — different. The barriers of rank stood permanently between confidence and truth.

It wasn't a friend who lay there sleeping. It was a superior officer — someone apart — removed. Intimacy and all that was out of reach — shut down for the duration of war.

17

'Here,' said Sir Balliol Miller, familiarly known to the members of his family as 'The Baron,' 'here is a damn long letter from a quite unpleasant fellar I thought I'd forgotten.'

'How does one think one's forgotten anybody?' Joan asked, over a slice of bread and jam. She had never cured herself of the nursery habit of spreading jam on bread, and what remained after the first bite looked like one of those newspaper war maps designed to illustrate the phrase 'All objectives were taken.'

'How does one think one's forgotten anybody?' she repeated. 'It would be a useful accomplishment these days.'

Lady Miller nodded slowly. 'It would,' she said; 'it would be very nice indeed.'

'By not remembering them,' replied the Baron breathily, for he was a breathy man — the kind of man who said 'Pooh!' more easily than any other word.

'You women had better read it, though,' he went on, 'as it refers to Frederick.'

With a rapidity unexpected in one of her size, Lady Miller whipped away the letter from her husband's hand.

'Aloud,' Joan demanded.

Lady Miller filled her lungs and read.

When she had finished, Joan seemed to have lost interest in her bread and jam.

'I never can remember names,' said Lady Miller, 'but surely Captain Trevelyan was that air-raid young man.'

Joan nodded.

'How nice for Freddie to be with a friend!'

'Jolly,' said Joan. 'Can I have a peep at the letter.' She read it through with a shadow of a frown — a puzzled frown. 'Drayton — I wonder if that is Paula Drayton's brother? Must be.'

Lady Miller wondered, too — but only vaguely.

'And I wonder,' said the Baron, 'if this fellar Fawlk feels it his duty to advertise the love affairs of all the officers under his command to disinterested parties. Is there another cup o' coffee, my dear?'

There was.

'Still it was very nice of him to write about Freddie,' said Lady Miller.

Joan had pushed back her plate. 'Fawlk,' she repeated. 'I believe I met him once — a year ago. A slug with little peering eyes and hands that wandered up and down one's back when one was dancing.' She shuddered expressively. 'What was he, anyway?'

'So far as I can remember,' said the Baron, 'he was a man who had done very well for himself out of minding other people's business. Well, well.'

Rising, he brushed his mouth with a napkin, kissed his wife's fat cheek and the smooth top of Joan's head, and went off to the Ministry at which he was employed.

Joan seemed lost in thought. Her fingers were drumming softly on the table.

'Finish up your bread and jam,' said her mother.

Joan came back with a start. 'Of course — yes, rather. I'm hungry.'

What was left she wolfed unceremoniously, finished her coffee, and jumped up.

Lady Miller asked, 'What are you doing to-day?'

'Prisoners — Grosvenor Square.'

It was raining a little, but Joan took no heed of that. She walked with long strides, too long for the length of her legs. Her hands were stuffed into the pockets of her short coat, also she whistled — a very vulgar thing to do in the streets. Real ladies witnessing her conduct were shocked by it. The war, they thought, was responsible for very bad manners among young people.

Once Joan stopped whistling and said to herself, 'He's a perfect right, of course, but still ——'

Curious how ardently at one time one may desire to cook for a man and at another refuse even to contemplate doing such a thing.

Paula Drayton! Well, why not? Very attractive, one supposed. Temperamental — complex. Full of swift and bewildering changes. Now languid — now active as an ant-heap poked by a stick.

Joan whistled 'If you were the only girl,' and passers-by stopped passing by to look over their shoulders. One young R.A.F. officer had the filthy cheek to stop and stare, and wrinkle his forehead inquiringly.

'I'll sing if I like,' said Joan.

But her way of saying it was not encouraging.

'Still, you'd think a man'd have more sense than to plump for that type,' she thought.

'There's more in this,' she said — whistled a few bars, and added — 'than meets the eye.'

Fawlk had been very attentive that night at the Savoy. Paddling round after her — paddle — paddle

— paddle. Always arriving where she finished up with any of his other partners. 'May I not have the pleasure of driving you home, Miss Miller?' and her reply, 'Thanks, I have my roller skates.' Which was true. She and Esme Raeburn had skated home together, and when a policeman in Trafalgar Square asked what they were doing, she had answered, 'Saving petrol.' A jealous man might have written that letter, but it was over a year since they had met. Besides, how could he know about — surely Harley wouldn't have said anything. No—no—oh, no. And yet—a puzzle.

What a miserable day — raining too!

> '... such wonderful things to you.
> There would be such wonderful things to do.
> If you ——'

Grosvenor Square — and a door marked 'Prisoners' Aid Depot.'

She had arrived.

'I say,' said Joan to the girl who kept the nominal rolls and duty rosters at the baize table in the hall, 'what department is Miss Drayton working in?'

'Surgical — when she does.'

'And does she to-day?'

'Half a jiffy.' A nominal roll with pencil ticks was consulted. 'Yes, for a wonder.'

'Why a wonder?'

The girl took off her glasses and wiped them.

'Because that's how it is with her. Absent for days on end and then all rush and fever and "Here we are" and "This war must be finished by Friday and no more nonsense about it" sort of thing.'

Joan went on to the changing room, took off her coat, rolled up her sleeves, and donned a blue overall with P.A.D. in red letters on the handkerchief pocket. Then she went upstairs to the Commandant's room.

'Can I have a shift for a day or two?' she asked.

'A shift — what kind of shift?'

'Into surgical. I've worked there before, and just for the moment I'm sick of cakes and candies.'

The expression of that sickness seemed unnecessarily vehement.

'If you like — we can do with extra help in that department. Three workers are on the sick-list. Take this chit to Miss Buddy.'

Miss Buddy stood so high, looked about twelve years old, had a voice like a chirrup of a canary, and was a holy terror to the idle.

'As long as you haven't come here for a holiday,' she said, 'and don't want to talk all day long. Still, you look as if you might have a little sense.' Witnessing a misdemeanour, she darted across the room. 'Den*ise!* how *can* you *be* so *stupid*! Undo that parcel and do it up again.'

Denise, a lovely creature with the eyes of a spaniel, sighed, bit her lip, shook her head as who should say 'Is one never to be understood?' and obeyed.

A place was found for Joan at Bench 4, with a little cockney chatterbox on one side of her and Lady Mary Ermyntrude Iphigenia Lafayette on the other. As small trays and lists were passed to Joan, she added, according to specification, bottles of Number 9 pills, fruit salts, calomel, senna pods, or podophyllin.

'It's more like relaxation than work,' she whispered.

Lady Mary, under the vigilant eye of Buddy, stifled a snort of laughter.

In that busy hive it was some time before Joan discovered Paula.

Paula was seated at Number 6, on Joan's extreme left. She was working with a feverish energy and concentration far beyond the needs of her occupation. Number 6 was devoted to narcotics and narcotics were dispatched sparingly to the prison camps. Even the milder forms of sedative are apt to do more harm than good to men who have little else to occupy them but loafing up and down before a hedge of electrically connected barbed wire.

On this account much of Paula's energy was spent in impatient delays — the drumming of her toes and fingers and the restless biting of her lips.

In a lull Joan had an opportunity to watch her, and thought she had never seen anyone strung up to a higher pitch of nervous tension. Joan had seen Paula before on sundry occasions, but this was the first time she had considered her with anything but casual interest. For quite primitive reasons she felt suddenly angry. If this was the girl Harley Trevelyan was in love with, he would have fun — she didn't think. It wouldn't do at all — she told herself. In their short acquaintance Joan had made up her mind that Harley was one of those steadfast, reliable men with an outer crust which concealed extraordinarily sensitive feelings. A woman like Paula — who might be splendid for a little while, but who would never be anything for long — would drive Harley into a padded cell in less than three months. Of course it wouldn't do.

Watching Paula through a mesh of plaited fingers, Joan's toes, too, started tap-tap-tapping the floor. And then Joan saw a peculiar thing. Paula had picked up one of the little bottles of sedative, with which her section abounded, and, dropping her hands, bore it beneath the table. Here, for a while, it and her hands remained hidden. Presently one hand returned to the table with a movement that was curiously quick and secretive. Once more the bottle was in place. A second later, Paula's other hand made three swift journeys from her lap to her mouth. A slow movement of the hollow cheeks showed that she was absorbing something rather than swallowing it.

'Oh, Jimminy!' said Joan, half aloud, 'that's not so good either.'

A new batch of trays commanded her attention, but in the next interval of labour she addressed Lady Mary.

'Isn't that Paula Drayton over there? Looks pretty well jazzed up.'

Lady Mary nodded. 'It's her brother. Quite a kid — just been sent to France. They are devoted, you know.'

'Poor darling,' said Joan. 'A vertical breeze, eh?'

Lady Mary nodded. 'An awful mistake, caring for people,' said she sententiously. 'Tempts Providence and Providence nearly always yields to temptation.'

'Cave-ee. Buddy's lookin',' whispered the little Cockney, and drove an elbow into Joan's ribs.

They worked in silence until the luncheon recess, when some of the workers scampered off home. Joan bought herself a seven-inch sausage roll in the buffet downstairs. One could buy sausage rolls without a coupon. She returned, gnawing it meditatively.

Paula had not moved. She was leaning back against the wall smoking and staring. The stare penetrated the walls of the room and a small section of the continent. It was a difficult sort of stare to interrupt. Joan helped herself to some water from the filter and let the cup bang on its chain when she let it go.

'Ah!' Paula exclaimed.

'That's done it,' thought Joan, and said, 'Hullo.'

Paula nodded a vague recognition.

Joan approached, perched herself on the bench, took another bite, and with swinging legs asked cheerfully, 'Aren't you going to lunch?'

Paula shook her head. 'No.'

'I'll get you something from below, shall I?'

'No, thanks.'

'Your brother's just gone abroad, hasn't he?' She didn't wait for a reply, but went on, 'I knew he had, because my brother is transport officer to the same battery.'

'Oh, oh, really!' Paula's interest had quickened. The stare returned from the other side of the Channel and was focussed on Joan.

'I expect he'll love it,' said Joan, puffily, for her mouth was full.

'I dare say,' said Paula. 'I dare say *he'll* love it.'

Joan wondered what to say next. She wasn't liking herself very much.

'Freddie, my brother, is sure to be bucked; he's only just been posted. He'll be bucked to death because a great friend of his is in the battery — Captain Trevelyan.'

'Yes,' said Paula cautiously, 'I know.' But with the tip of her tongue she moistened her lips. Then, without apparent interest, she added, 'He's a friend of David's, too, and of mine.'

It was Joan's turn to say 'Yes.'

'Do you know Harley Trevelyan?'

Joan shrugged her shoulders. 'Not to say know — we've met — just met.'

'I see. He has just been home on leave.' Joan nodded, and looked at the small pink circle of sausage in her roll. 'Yes, it was then we met. The last night of his leave. We saw the air raid together.'

Paula started and leaned forward, her hands gripping the edge of the table. Barely above a whisper she said, 'You — it was you, then — it was you?'

Joan was puzzled. 'Why? What do you mean, it was me?'

Paula's mouth had screwed itself into a smile. 'Oh, nothing — much,' and added, 'Extraordinary!'

'What is? Did he speak to you about me?'

'No,' said Paula, hard as nails. 'Why should he?'

If cutting up rough was the order, two could play. 'Then how did you know it *was* me?'

There was a longish silence before Paula answered. All the offence had vanished from her voice. 'A man in love carries the fact branded all over him. That's how.'

But Paula was an unknown quantity to Joan. For all she knew, the words might have been spoken to draw her out.

Two can draw out. She said, 'Do they? How very obliging of them! How did you learn that?'

The answer was cryptic. 'Not from a man who made me any the happier for the lesson.'

Again a silence. Then Joan, leaning over, thumped the heel of her fist on the back of one of Paula's hands that lay upon the table-top.

'I think,' she said awkwardly, 'I think I haven't behaved very nicely.'

'My poor child, you've nothing to reproach yourself with.'

'Well, if you say so.'

'Oh, yes, I say so,' Paula nodded. With a new expression she searched Joan's face and said, 'You certainly have the guns, my dear. Yes, you have the guns, all right. I could almost kiss you and wish you luck, but I'm no Judas, and the words' — she laughed — 'the words 'ud stick in my throat and choke me.'

18

For several days David Drayton had been making a hoard of misery. Suppression of his thoughts increased the hoard until there was no room in him to hold it all. Injustice was the root of his troubles — the injustice of the world — the failure of people to do or say or be the right thing. There was so much in life that he could not endure. Boylike he wanted every problem to work itself out to his own pattern. Boylike he was sure his pattern was the right one.

Because he loved Harley, with a doglike devotion no combination of circumstances would destroy, he directed the outburst at someone else. And Freddie Miller provided the target. Freddie Miller was responsible for Harley's disaffection. But for Miller, Harley would never have met Joan. Very well, then, Miller was to blame. He should have it — and he got it.

With his transfer to the A.S.C., Freddie had had to drop a pip. A captain is an awkward fellow for a second lieutenant to pitch into. A lieutenant is easier stuff altogether. Senior, of course, but not so senior as to matter. Anyway, one could take a chance. Moreover, Freddie belonged to a different unit. The A.S.C. 'The Afternoon Sleeping Corps' — 'The All Safe and Comfortables.' Fair game to have a smack at.

Besides, the fellow asked for it. Always gay — always laughing — always putting on the gramophone and doing cellar-flaps on the mud floor of the B.C. post. Treated the war as a joke, he did, as if all this beastliness was just one damned shout of laughter.

That night things came to a head.

Freddie Miller was repeating a home letter one of his drivers had given him for censorship.

My darling wife and kiddies,

The —— French people in this village are nothing better than a lot of ——s. They begrudge our boys a drop of water to wash with. Never mind, the war will soon be over, then they can all go to ——. With fondest love to you and the darling kiddies,

Yours
JACK

Hammersley was enchanted and roared. The others roared too, Frost, Lammington, and Harley. Fawlk was not present.

Encouraged by the success of his efforts to entertain, Freddie embarked upon a word picture purporting to have been overheard that day. The driver of a gun team was having difficulty in persuading his mare to cross a ditch. He had begun his coercion with words of encouragement and many endearments.

'Come along, little lidy. Not afride of a bit of a ditch, my beauty — my lovely girl.'

But it seemed the little 'lidy' was afraid and exhibited increasing reluctance. Whereupon endearment gave way to encouragement of a sterner kind, which rapidly ascended a scale of gathering abuse in which every combination of invective and expletive poured forth in one unbroken blind crescendo.

It may be that Freddie drew from his imagination as well as the raw material supplied by the driver. His manner of telling the tale and his admirable mimicry excited shouts of approval from his audience. Hammersley passed out, and poor little Frost, who lost his balance under the smallest provocation, rolled on the floor in an agony of mirth which robbed his limbs of voluntary action.

'A dear, simple-hearted fellar, that driver,' said Freddie. 'I do like a man who isn't afraid to say just what he means in any company.'

'Do you?' The speaker was David. His voice, low, vibrant, and hoarse, was scarcely recognisable. 'Do you?' he repeated.

'Well, I said so,' Freddie replied, the humorous lines at the corners of his mouth straightening out a trifle.

'You might not like it so much if he said what he meant about you.'

'David ——' Harley began, but Freddie cut in on him.

'Let's hear what's coming,' he said, with a touch of steel in his tone. 'Go on, youngster.'

David bit his lip. 'You're senior to me.'

'We won't let a paltry pip keep us apart.'

Harley got up. 'Shut up, David,' he said, poured out a drink, and pushed it towards the boy. 'Wrap yourself round that. No sparring. Life's too short.'

'I won't drink, sir, thank you.'

'Then sit down and don't be an ass.'

'Very well, sir.'

'And stop calling me sir.'

David sat down with clenched fists. And there was silence. Then outside a recurrent whine and crackle began.

Someone said, 'Shrapnel.'

Freddie rose and tightened the belt of his trench coat.

'I'd better get my lorries under way,' he said. 'Don't want to leave my boys with nothing but a tarpaulin over them.'

'And something might hit this dugout,' said David icily.

For a moment Freddie did not reply. Chaff and a bit of leg-pulling was all in the day's work, but it is not healthy to cast doubts upon a man's courage.

'It wouldn't be fair to leave my boys in the open while I talk to you,' he said slowly, 'but if you've the guts to walk down the lane as far as the lorries, we could say things as we go.'

David was on his feet in an instant, but before he could answer, Harley said, 'I told you to sit down, David. It's not a usual order, but I expect it to be obeyed.'

'Very good, sir.'

The smile slowly returned to Freddie's face, coaxed back by an incorrigible good-humour.

'Exit a terrified A.S.C. officer,' he said, laughed, and plunged up the steps into the night.

With an instinct of tact Frost put a tune on the gramophone. The tune was 'A Bachelor Gay.' He and Hammersley joined in the chorus.

'At seventeen he falls in love quite madly
   With eyes of a tender blue.
At twenty-one he gets it rather badly
   With eyes of a different hue.'

The crackle of shrapnel ceased.

Harley touched David on the shoulder. 'Time to turn in.'

David followed him like a dog. As they walked along the sunken road to their own quarters, he burst out suddenly: 'I can't stand it! I can't stand it! He thinks he can come here and be funny and make dirty jokes and ——'

Harley's fingers closed tightly round the boy's upper arm. 'That'll do, won't it?'

It was not the time for sympathy. A kind word would tip David over an abyss into hysteria. He had seen the symptoms too often to fail to recognise them now. The lit-up eyes and twitching lips and limbs. Only the baldest discipline could help control them.

'What the hell is there to laugh at?' David exploded.

'Damn little, and that's why we should grab at any chance. Scrape up a laugh overnight and it'll help you no end through an awkward day. Men like Miller do more good out here than any other kind. And don't forget it.'

David dragged his arm away angrily. 'I'll choose for myself what I want to forget.'

'David,' said Harley, 'that won't do. If you've a grouse, tell me and I'll help you out, but sulks and tempers belong to the nursery — they don't belong here. Understand?'

David walked in silence for a few paces — boiling. Then, 'Yes, sir. I understand.'

'And don't call me sir.'

And then the flood gates of rebellion broke. 'I will call you sir, for that's what you are — all you are. Someone I can't tell things to — talk to — overflow to — a damned stranger who walks about on the floor above. Sir! *Sir!* SIR!'

Harley slid an arm round the boy's shoulders and held him tight. 'That's all right, old man,' he said, 'I know things look that way at first, but it wears off and eases down, and after a while we don't even notice it. Now, then, stiffen up and swallow the steel and come in with the rest.'

David rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand.

'You're awfully decent, really,' he stammered. 'Bit out of my depth. Everything seems so big and against me.'

'I know,' said Harley. 'It takes time to get one's crust browned. But it'll come.'

But to himself Harley thought, 'Thank God, he let me have it. I've bitten off a mouthful with this boy, all right.'

But later he wrote to Paula that David was doing splendidly and everyone liked him.

19

A few nights after his outburst, David sheepishly followed Freddie Miller down the lane and said he was sorry.

Freddie, who never bore a grudge for more than five minutes, gave him a friendly punch on the forearm and said 'shurrr-up' in the kindest way possible.

'I *am* sorry, all the same,' David insisted. 'I acted like a cad, and I know it.'

'Gosh,' said Freddie, 'I wouldn't like to confess the number of times I've acted that way, old son.' Then, because he was curious, added, 'Was it the story I told that bit you?'

'Yes,' David began, shook his head, and said, 'No, not really.'

'Well, what? I'm interested.'

David hesitated. 'You've a sister, Miller, haven't you?'

'You bet I have.'

'So've I.'

'Yes, I know — I met her somewhere.'

'Trevelyan ——' David began, and stopped.

'Well — old Harley — yes? What about him?'

But David shook his head. 'P'r'aps I'd better say nothing.'

Freddie thought for a moment, put two and two together, deducted one — put another two and two together and saw something.

'P'r'aps you're right, old son,' he said gently. 'I think I can see what's got you, so there's no call to show your hand.'

And with a wave of the hand Freddie plodded off down the sloppy lane — the light of his torch falling upon shell holes and scurrying rats.

20

Freddie Miller puzzled a bit on his way back to billets that night. He knew nothing, of course, of the scene in the O.C.'s dugout when Harley had torn Joan's picture from the wall. Assuming Harley to be sweet on Joan, how could that youngster have known anything about it? 'H. T.' was the last fellar on earth to brag of his love affairs. Why, you couldn't even drag him into a general talk about 'gels.'

A letter from Joan was waiting for Freddie when he reached his billet. Her bold round writing smothered the envelope like a picture of dynamos.

> I say you [said the letter], what sort of a blighter is that battery O. C. Fawlk? He had the sauce to drive some of his prongs at the Baron disguised under a lump of butter with you dressed up as an angel sitting on top of it. But that wasn't the real whyfor of the letter — which was a mean deal for Harley. You know, undercurrent stuff.

Followed a quotation from Fawlk's letter.

What's the idea? How did he know I was stuck on Harley? Did the Drayton boy tell him? And how did the Drayton boy know? Harley wouldn't let on. There's a mystery and I want to get to the bottom of it. I had a shot myself — got into a talk with Paula Drayton. She, poor soul, is Harley mad, and only eats aspirin because of him. But I gather he doesn't retaliate or reciprocate or whatever the word may be. Jolly sad for her it is and I'm damned sorry — so damned sorry that I've never stopped singing since I got to know about it. You see, Freddie, I've got it badly, so let's face it. I can hardly remember what Harley looks like, but I want reminding. I spent last night rummaging in your room for old 'Varsity groups and found one with what may be Harley in it. He was sitting with his feet crossed nursing a football. It's a very small picture, and I thought at first it was a group of saints gathered round someone who was washing a baby. Is it Harley? You'll know. If it isn't, I shan't care, for he looks an awful blob in it — but if it is Harley, I might forget that and cut it out and buy a locket. By the way, how is he? I'm afraid he's injured his wrist, or is it only nerves? I haven't written, either, if it comes to that, but, after all, modesty is modesty. I am enclosing a blank sheet of notepaper. If you've got the pluck, you might give it to him. Tell him he can choose between that and a ratchet screwdriver. He'll understand. You can't tell me that a man who plots with servants to keep a girl off the roof of her own house doesn't know what an indelible pencil is for. And free postage.

Darling Freddie, next time you write don't be too personal. Your own experiences are enthralling but — there are other things. Good-bye, sweet angel.

JOAN

Freddie chuckled all the way through it. Still chuckling he grabbed a writing-pad and wrote.

Have a little pride. Yes, it was Harley — but try my trunk in the attic and you may do better. There's one of him as President of the Athletic, with a church in the background to set your girlish heart a-flutter. By the way, I owe my tailor three hundred, partly for clothes. Forgot to mention it to the Baron before leaving. Bill enclosed. You might find a favourable opportunity to bring it to the Baron's notice.

Don't understand about Fawlk, but from signs and omens there seems to have been a love storm up at the battery. Harley has certainly been hit by something that wasn't made in Germany. I caught him a day or two ago staring at a busted tree that looked like a bunch of broken toothpicks, with the kind of expression you'd expect a man to wear if the cherry was in bloom. I met a fellow out here who is a professional card sharp in civilian life. He was rather tight and showed me one or two things both useful and surprising. My love, sweet angel, and your commissions shall be faithfully carried out. 'The girls need lovers and, by Heaven, they shall have 'em.' 'Night, 'night.

FREDDIE

But since no ammunition was wanted by the battery for the next two days, and as Freddie was employed with his column carting bricks, which once had been a village, for road repairs, the carrying-out of those commissions was delayed.

It happened, in consequence, that it was not from any promptings of Joan's that Harley's first letter to her was written. The implement that persuaded him was a violent one — its calibre was 5.9 with an interior lining of H.E. It went off much nearer to Harley than was either safe or comfortable. Harley was standing at the top of his dugout steps when it detonated and was sitting at the bottom of them afterwards. What had just happened might very well happen again and luck could not be relied upon always to show him consideration. For better or worse, that shell had settled it, and, snatching a pencil and a writing-block from his kit bag, he wrote:

> Joan, I must say it — I love you.
>
> HARLEY

He crammed it into an envelope which he addressed, stamped with the censorship stamp, and scrawled his signature.

The thing was done.

And in the fullness of time which, in certain circumstances, can be surprisingly empty, came a reply which said:

> I feel very funny about you myself. I tingle a lot, and when I wake up in the morning my toes won't keep still.

Thereafter Harley walked the battery position with the air of a man who was unconscious that nations were at war.

21

In the spring of that year, following weeks of unprecedented ice and snow, the Germans retired to the Hindenburg Line, and the second battle of Arras, with alternating successes and failures, fought its way laboriously into summer and stagnation. Battery 007 had joined what was known as 'A Circus,' and for several months had travelled by night, belched hideous protest at fortified places in the dawn, and moved on to the next date on the tour list.

In the circumstances leave was suspended, nor did the O.C. Major Fawlk exert himself to obtain it either for his officers or other ranks.

Since that night when Harley had torn Joan's picture from the walls of his dugout, he had become more remote and more malicious than ever. Freddie Miller, who did not actually come under his command, was the only officer he treated with anything but the most frigid discourtesy.

The talks he used to hold with Harley on the subject of painting and literature were never revived. He had retired into a watchful solitude of his own — from which he conducted a telescopic examination of the shortcomings of the battery's personnel. The result was the reduction to the ranks of three corporals and the B.Q.M.S., a willing if not very intelligent N.C.O., who as a regular would have been due for his service pension in six weeks' time. Also he was responsible for the postponement of Frost's promotion and the return to the base of Hammersley — who got a much better job.

These judicious and uncharitable acts were skilfully camouflaged under the robe of military zeal. The Hammersley incident was not without humour. Hammersley, who had just returned, to use his own expression, 'whacked to the wide after sixteen hours' chopping in the O. Pip,' was summoned to the O.C.'s quarters three minutes after he had fallen asleep, to wade through a number of unnecessary dispositions connected with the battery shift next day. That these dispositions were unnecessary bears no argument, as from the moment the guns were pinned to the tractors' couplings, they came under the exclusive command of the Transport Officer, Freddie Miller, and all that was required of the battery commander was that he should go to sleep in the back of a box Daimler and not wake up until they arrived at their new position. To Fawlk this was an order of things which, although decreed, was utterly intolerable. He could not bear to allow the command to pass into other hands for one moment. In consequence elaborate dispositions were an inevitable concomitant of every shift.

'As you are aware, Mr. Hammersley, the battery moves to-morrow to a new position.'

'Yes, sir,' Hammersley replied, stifling a yawn.

'These are the movement orders, and you and I will go through the whole *thing* from A to Z.'

'Look here, sir,' said Hammersley, his eyes regarding with dismal disapproval a closely written manuscript in the O.C.'s hand, 'I haven't shut an eye for a couple of days.'

'What has that to do with it?'

'Nothing, sir, of course, but I wondered if it wouldn't do as well if we went as far as M to-night and tackled the rest of the alphabet in the morning.'

Major Fawlk chewed the end of his pencil thoughtfully, then he said, 'That will do, Mr. Hammersley.'

And Hammersley went. It might have turned out badly for him, but he had a good record, and at Heavies they had their own opinion of Fawlk's methods. The Staff Captain told the Brigadier what he thought of the business and the Brigadier paid the battery an informal visit. For half an hour Fawlk walked up and down beside the Brigadier, who was mounted.

Later, with a view to suggesting that he had spent an agreeable half-hour with the Brigadier, Fawlk engaged Harley in conversation of a non-military character. Pointing with his cane to a crater which contained part of a brick wall, some barbed wire, the dead body of a mule, human remains, and an unexploded shell, he remarked that, with a little 'patterning,' it would make an effective 'abstract' of the war. 'The kind of composition that savours more of literature than of painting.'

Harley acknowledged that it might, but found little in the pit to appease his appetite for art. But this unexpected cordiality of Fawlk's encouraged him to suggest David Drayton for a grant of leave.

'Eight months is a long time for a boy like that, sir, and he's done very good work.'

The answer might have been more felicitously expressed. 'That, Trevelyan, is a matter you can safely leave for *me* to decide. Yes.'

That is as far as it went.

There is no question that David Drayton had done well — very well; but the long, unbroken spell of warfare had begun to tell on him. To the most casual observer it was clear that monotony and unvarying unloveliness was wearing him down. The mud, the trampled and torn earth, the stink of cordite, and the pungent sweetness of tear gas, the unattainable foreground, the hideous crowded background, the threat of shells, the thunder of guns and men and more men and nothing but men, had all conspired to take the shine out of his soul.

For long periods, when not at work, he would sit, with down-hanging arms, staring sullenly at nothing. From these moods Harley found it hard to rouse him.

'I do my job, but apart from that I don't seem to care about anything,' he complained.

That carelessness found unconscious expression in his home letters.

Paula wrote to Harley — an appeal — almost frantic in its intensity.

Can't you do anything? Or are you so happy that nothing else matters. Eight months and not a day off! Harley, he's dying inside himself. I put my trust in you, and what are you doing?

It was November, and the battery, deserting the circus, was in position on the Cambrai front. Things were quiet, too; concert parties springing up at the back of the front and special trains to Amiens. There was no earthly reason why leave should not be granted. Freddie Miller had 'clicked' and even Fawlk had taken four days, spending them in Paris, whence he returned smiling reminiscently and libidinously to himself. During his absence, Harley had another try. This time he tackled Amesbury, the Staff Captain of Heavies.

'Might do,' said the brass hat, 'but between ourselves things are breezing up for a show. Still' — he paused and rapped his teeth with a penholder — 'an allotment of one leave voucher to your battery wouldn't hurt. I'll look into it, Trevelyan.'

Notice that a voucher would be allotted to the officer longest in France without leave was delivered to the battery on the night of Fawlk's return.

He viewed it with displeasure and passed the chit to Harley.

'That will be Drayton, sir.'

'On the contrary, it will be you.'

Harley gulped. It would be as easy as it was desirable to grab the voucher and then — Joan. In the whole of his war experience, no greater opportunity for self-sacrifice had been offered or taken.

''Fraid not, sir,' he said. 'We reached the battery the same day, but Drayton was ahead of me by four or five hours.'

'If you choose to split a hair,' said Fawlk.

He was not sure enough of his position with 'Heavies' to return the voucher, so he sent formal acknowledgment and Drayton's name and asked for the date. A reply came, giving a date eight days ahead.

When David was told, he behaved as other young men were accustomed to behave in similar circumstances. Which is to say he dodged at the whine of a bullet and prostrated himself at the approach of shells. Apart from these obvious precautions, he sang lustily and out of tune to gramophone records, he danced with Frost in an E.F.C. canteen, he wrote four letters a day to Paula, and generally acted like a lunatic.

In these manifestations of rejoicing, with the best will in the world, Harley was unable to join. He had done the impossible — had gambled with Providence and given his leave warrant away. The knowledge that self-sacrifice is its own reward failed to alleviate his sufferings. To add to his woe came a letter from Joan, reproaching him warmly for not coming home.

'Everyone else has — so why not you?'

It is to his credit that, in replying, he did not tell her the truth.

On the fourth day of the eight, Freddie Miller returned and appeared at the battery astride a motor-cycle. Freddie was very full of himself and of England and perhaps an odd spot of whiskey. He had had, he confessed, a marvellous time. Apart from discoveries of a more or less exotic nature, he had found a club where 'Chemmy' was played and had cleaned up 'two hundred quid,' every penny of which he had blown in on riotous living. It was not until Harley accompanied him to his motor-cycle that he referred to Joan.

'Quite well, thank you,' he said, with an odd seriousness; then — 'D'you think you could get a day off for Amiens to-morrow?'

'I could, but I shan't.'

'What a pity!' said Freddie.

'Why a pity?'

'Thought you might care for a glimpse of Joan.'

Harley yelled and took him by the throat.

'She's stopping at the Ville de France for a day or two. Came over to-day with an old bird who inspects canteens — an aunt of ours.'

Harley did not trust himself to speak. At last, 'Freddie,' he said, 'if this isn't true — you die.'

'Then I live,' said Freddie.

For a glorious moment Harley shut his eyes. Then, 'Wait a minute,' he said, and went off in search of Fawlk.

'Amiens,' said Fawlk, with a smile; 'rather a second-rate suggestion, isn't it?'

'I've friends there — from England.'

'Oh!' Fawlk mused awhile, delighting himself in the agony delay was causing. 'Well, well,' he said, 'one reason is as good as another. Yes, unless we get a heavy programme, you may have a day.'

Harley went out before he should think better of it.

Freddie was waiting.

'It's all right. Can you get a wire off to her? This.' He scribbled in his notebook and tore out the sheet.

'How about getting there?' Freddie queried.

'Don't worry. I'll get there if I walk on all fours.'

'I might be able to do something in the way of a car.'

'You will,' said Harley; 'make no mistake — you will.'

As it happened there was no need. Fawlk had prepared a list of purchases to be made.

'In that case, sir,' said Harley, 'you won't mind my using the battery car.'

22

Of that journey to Amiens, beyond the fact that a start was made at dawn, Harley had no memory. The road led through Roisel, the scuppered and roofless township of Péronne, and thence by Chaulnes, and Villers-Bretonneux, at which, a year after, the final thrust against the British front broke down and was turned to rout.

It was a little before nine when the car entered the town by a bumpy cobbled street that widened majestically towards the railway station. Following a narrow thoroughfare on the right, it drew up eventually before a swinging hotel sign bearing the words La Ville de France.

Dismissing the driver with orders to report at the Cathedral at 9 P.M., Harley, whose heart was banging like a smithy shop, passed through an archway into a courtyard chock-a-block with various types of mud-bespattered motor-cars.

Harley entered the bureau and addressed himself to a lady who wore a black woollen dress and hair which seemed of the same material. The lady, who was casting up figures, in no way hurried herself to reply to Harley's inquiry. She held him in suspense before an erect index finger until such a time as a total had been arrived at. Harley repeated his inquiry and she rummaged among the litter in her desk for a slip of paper.

'Le Capitaine Trevelyan, c'est vous?'

'Oui, madame.'

'Bon.'

Harley observed that his name was written on the slip.

The *grosse dame*, the hostess informed him, is out, also the little.

'Out, but where?' cried Harley, despair gnawing at his vitals.

'She ees not far — she back soon; she say I look at things for ten minute.'

Harley bored out into the sunlight. The group of officers had dispersed and two or three of the cars had purred out of the courtyard. The block was no longer impenetrable. At the far end, beneath the running-board of a Box Daimler, Harley beheld a small pair of brogue shoes typically suggestive of the English counties. Towards them, through a vehicular maze, he plunged. To reach them he had to climb over three side-cars and squeeze himself between the bonnet of a Vauxhall and the muddy back of a Siege Park Sunbeam.

Joan was standing with her back to a whitewashed wall upon which, naturally enough, the sun shone. Her hands were crammed in the pockets of a reefer jacket. She wore no hat.

Six feet away, Harley halted and looked at her. She did not raise her eyes slowly and demurely to meet his, but swung her head round with a jerk, at once hostile and defensive and offensive. That this action was not directed with a view to Harley being Harley was made abundantly clear at the moment of recognition. The lightnings vanished from the eyes and her face assumed an expression of anxious yet devouring interest, coupled with a slightly hesitating humour.

Thus they stood looking at each other in unbroken silence, what time the anxiety passed away, the interest was satisfied, and the humour, taking possession of her voice as well as of her eyes, found vent in the words, 'So you are the man?'

'Yes,' he nodded; 'but that doesn't matter, Joan.'

'It does, indeed,' said she.

'All that matters is that you — that you ——'

'That I am the only girl?'

'Just that,' said Harley.

'Good,' said Joan, flopped at the knees, straightened up, shut her eyes, and went distractingly limp.

In that limpness, with the knowledge of inevitable consequences, she defended herself with an outstretched hand.

'Not yet — not for a second; not until I've finished shaking hands with myself.'

'Oh, Joan,' he said.

'Oh, angel,' she answered. 'I'm having such a happy time with my eyes shut. I'm driving away all the Harleys you might have been — and some of them were fearful! Oh! but I've been terrified, terrified! I'd made you up as I wanted you, and s'pose you hadn't been like it! It didn't seem possible you could be like it. That's why I hid myself here behind all these dirty motor-cars. Angel, my knees were whimbley and I was shy — shy. D'you know — d'you know ——'

But he didn't wait to hear. He gathered her up and kissed and went on kissing her; and since ecstasy and simile are never far apart, violets were not so fresh as her lips were fresh, nor apple blossom as radiant as her hot young face. The scent of her hair would have caused a rose to shed its petals in despair, and the warmth of her embrace have made a south wind die of envy.

Lost in a frenzied happiness to which there was no ceiling, they clung to one another in the shabby courtyard among mud-splashed cars and banging shutters. Even a voice from an upstairs window which yelled 'Half Time,' failed to penetrate the armour of delight which in that moment protected them from the rest of the world.

When, at last, they released one another, Joan did an extraordinary thing — she danced for joy. Harley knew it was for joy she danced because, utterly without shame, she told him so. Harley would probably have joined her in that corybantine revel but that, in the delirium of happiness, he had cast himself against the wall and bumped his head with such violence as to be temporarily stunned.

The same voice which had shouted 'Half Time' once more identified itself with the proceedings. 'You seem to be pretty happy down there.'

And Joan, with her fists driven into her waist and her head up, bawled back, 'Do you blame me?'

'I don't blame *him*,' was the outrageous answer.

Even Harley could find no fault with that.

23

Violent emotions reacted almost immediately upon Joan's appetite. Hand in hand they bore down upon the town and, finding a *pâtisserie* — shadowy wraith of its pre-war glories — they occupied a table and called for coffee, rolls, eggs, and sardines.

'We must have sardines, angel,' said Joan, 'because I first began to love you when Freddie tried to bag more than his share the night of the raid.'

'I began before that,' said Harley contemptuously. 'I began as soon as you collared hold of my hand and dragged me up to the roof.'

'What, directly?'

'Well, before we'd reached the second landing,' said he.

Joan gave an exhilarated little laugh. 'Later,' she said, 'we'll decide on the exact spot and have a plate fixed to the banisters.'

A vanguard to the breakfast in the form of a jug of coffee and milk interfered with the traffic of hand-holding which, otherwise, had occupied the surface of the table.

'Now, look here,' said he, the proprietor of the *pâtisserie* having withdrawn, 'about our marriage?'

'That's it,' said Joan.

'You see,' Harley went on, 'I don't know whether we can trust the war to finish soon enough.'

'We can't,' said Joan. 'Not possibly.'

Harley brought his fist down on the table. 'Then I'll simply tell the old man I've *got to have some leave*.' With every vital word he banged the table afresh.

'If you don't, I'll come along to the battery and tell him so myself,' and she, too, beat the table.

He leant towards her. 'Joan, my Joan, I adore you.'

'Oh, don't, angel,' she pleaded. 'When you talk like that, it's too much for me, and we'll knock everything over.'

Possibly with a desire to avoid this calamity, the hostess put fresh ballast on the table in the form of sardines, eggs, rolls, and butter. All of which were consumed with an avidity of which lovers are reputed to be incapable.

The meal over, Harley pushed back his chair and surveyed the immediate future.

'Let's go and buy something for the house,' he said;

'doesn't matter what, but something to make a start. After that we might sit in the cathedral, where we are sure to be alone.'

'Angel, it sounds divine,' said Joan, 'but I've a terrible confession to make.'

'Then the cathedral is the right place to make it.'

But Joan shook her head. 'You see, I only got to France by promising to be useful. And for a part of the morning, at least, I've got — positively got — to do those canteens.'

Harley's face went black. 'Who says so?'

'Aunt Maud. Miss Beechcroft. The old skylark I came over with. But you can come, too.'

'Look here,' said Harley glumly, 'does this mean a gooseberry all day?'

'No, I swear it doesn't. We can shake her off after lunch when she's doing her reports.'

'We will, too,' he said, and, rising, paid the bill.

Together they walked down the Boulevard Carnot to the Gare Saint-Noel.

In the early morning — and it was still early — the city had the air of being rather ashamed of itself. The joy-seekers of yesternight had been rapt away to the fulfilment of sterner duties and there remained in the grey streets but a few beshawled women who conducted their shopping with gestures and imprecations. The special trains from the front had not yet delivered up the virtuous into the hands of vice and, pending their arrival, shops, cafés, and other places of amusement had lapsed into a kind of depraved inertia.

Watchful for details who had overstayed their leave, a few red hats, myrmidons of the A.P.M., marched the pavements with stern tread. The mottled grey houses on either side appeared to be recoiling from the sunlight which revealed their pathetic lack of paint and plaster.

And yet to Harley and to Joan it was an enchanted city where no shadow of a fault could be detected. In their love-distorted imaginations the designer of Elysium could not have provided features of greater loveliness and delight. The tawdry shops with their tawdrier wares were palaces of perfection richly stocked with treasures of the Indes. For was there not a jeweller, and did he not provide a plain gold ring which fitted so tightly onto the chubby little finger of Joan's left hand as never to be likely to come off?

At a pharmacy they made another halt, and here, being on surer ground, Harley gave a shipping order for scents and soaps to be delivered at the hotel.

What with one thing and another and what he had to buy for the battery, they did not arrive at the station until nearly noon, for you may be very sure the hands of the clocks played some pretty pranks that morning, whizzing round and flipping away the hours as though they were minutes.

'Me for a broadside,' said Joan, when, at last, they pushed open the doors of the canteen.

But her alarms were ill-founded, since her aunt, Miss Beechcroft, was so deeply occupied in the business of inspection and was conducting it with such drastic thoroughness as to have been unconscious of neglect.

Miss Beechcroft was a lady of singularly generous proportions. In a word, she was Monitor-built. Her figure was of that kind which is referred to by the ribald as 'three times round to the mile.' The responsibility of moving this immense bulk of flesh did not detract from her energy, but seemed to lend dynamic vigour to all her movements. She was clad in some sort of uniform of her own contriving — a coat and skirt of rifle green, top boots, a leather belt, and a hat which vaguely suggested that she had acquired it in battle during the Boer War. Her methods of inspection were based on the theory that everything was sure to be wrong and that the helpers were certain to be idle. Pursuant to this policy, she addressed them with a ferocity that a sergeant instructor of the Guards would have been hard-pressed to rival. In contradistinction to this attitude towards the helpers was the manner in which she addressed the helped. Let him be what he might — a rough-necked Anzac, a hoary-headed N.C.O. of twenty years' service, a turbaned Punjabi, or a scrubby *poilu* from the *trottoirs* of Marseilles — to him she was as the cooing dove, speaking with a tenderness and simplicity which would have brought the blush of shame to the cheek of the youngest child in a nursery.

'Does he want some coffee, then? and he shall have it.' And then with a roar as of a bursting mine, '*What* are you girls chattering about? Bring coffee to this man AT ONCE!'

It testifies to the superior courage of women over men that, whereas the lady helpers faced her thunder with submissive fortitude, members of the allied forces gulped down their coffee and victuals and fled with a precipitation seldom exhibited upon the fields of battle.

Harley and Joan's entry was made as those very words were uttered.

'Hadn't we better clear out?' he suggested.

'No fear. She's rather a duck, really,' Joan reassured him. 'You'll like her.'

Harley doubted it, but a moment later he found that she was right in this as in all else. For when Aunt Maud Beechcroft bore down upon them with a celerity which put Harley to a fresh alarm that he would be crushed beneath her, he discovered that she possessed a roguish twinkle in her eyes and lines of a merry humour about the corners of her mouth.

'I've precious little time for spoony couples,' she declared, 'but I'm glad to meet you, young man, and I dare say Joan is a good excuse. If you want food, don't have it here — for, as I was saying a moment ago, there's nothing *fit* to eat in the *whole canteen*.'

Miss Beechcroft picked up an umbrella, which was singularly ill-suited to her martial appearance, and, gathering in Harley and Joan, led an impressive retreat.

Fifty yards from the door of the canteen she said unexpectedly: 'Those girls are running it very well. It's pure waste of time sending an inspector to a place like that, and they know it. That's why I kicked up all that row.' She looked at the station clock. 'Now, if we hurry, we could get lunch in the hotel dining-room before the licentious soldiery arrive. Not that I care, but I've an idea that this man of yours'd start punching heads. Tell me, how far has this thing gone with you two?'

'A life sentence, no less,' said Joan.

Harley nodded.

'In that case,' said Miss Beechcroft, 'you'll be wanting to spend the afternoon in some place where you can hold hands and make imbecile faces at each other.'

It speaks for their honesty that neither Joan nor Harley made any pretence of denying this charge.

'But the trouble is that no such place, with any respectability attached to it, exists in this infamous town.'

Harley agreed gloomily.

Miss Beechcroft took shrewd stock of him and decided that he was all right. 'As it happens, I've a heap of letters to write and reports to make and appeals to frame,' said she. 'Joan's room communicates with mine, and while I'm busy I don't see why you couldn't sit in there and have your silly talk. I shan't be listening even though the door will be ajar.'

24

The popular conception of an angel does not include persons of sixty years who tip the beam at nineteen stone. Which proves that popular conceptions may not always be trusted. That Aunt Maud Beechcroft was an angel, although disguised under a mantle of adipose tissue, can no longer be in doubt.

Faithful to her promise, and with the communicating door no more ajar than would suffice to prevent the latch from clicking, she carried out her correspondence with a detachment which might have justifiably given rise to the impression that she was doing it in some remote continent.

By virtue of this preoccupation, Harley and Joan had what can best be described as a wonderful time. Indeed, the wonder of that time was marred only by its brevity, as witnessed by the indescribable callousness of the city clocks.

'What is it about love that alters one so?' said Joan. 'Until now I have been rather an up-and-doing hard little nut.'

'And now?' Harley asked.

'Now,' she replied, 'all I can think of is buying hanks of wool and knitting things for you to wear.'

Twilight, a mere fraction of dimness preluding the invasion of night, was upon them before they had time to realise that day was ending.

At seven o'clock, Miss Beechcroft rose with a becoming clatter which afforded Joan an opportunity to put in order with a comb the spilled gold of her hair. The lovers were discreetly apart when this Brobdingnagian angel stood framed in the doorway. Joan had a very crimson patch on her left cheek and Harley was likewise overcoloured on the right, but since that was no less than might have been expected, they were allowed to assume their normal pallor without comment.

'I am going to the station for the French hospital train which is coming through,' said Miss Beechcroft, 'so if your young man wants to give you dinner, now's his chance.'

It seemed that this was what Harley wanted to do. Nor was Joan reluctant.

'And when do you have to leave, young man?'

It was the first time the question of separation had been touched upon, and Harley said half-past nine, gloomily enough.

'Then I wish you good-bye and good luck.'

So Harley kissed Miss Beechcroft and Miss Beechcroft boxed his ear in a manner that was almost caressing.

Thereafter Harley took Joan to the Café de la Cathédrale, where was a very festive company of officers and girls who conversed at the tops of their voices, pinched each other's cheeks, and carried on much pioneer work with feet under the table.

In a sense Harley and Joan were glad of the racket. It rendered the less obvious that silence which, with the imminence of parting, had fallen upon them. They had lost appetite for food. Dishes came and went untouched, what time they looked at each other, learning and remembering the minutest details of each other's features.

And Joan smoked many, too many cigarettes — looking at Harley all the while through blue spirals of ascending smoke. And Harley felt that the whole strength and volume and flame of his love for her had gathered deep down in his throat and was burning his vocal cords into an everlasting dumbness.

And all the while the clocks were up to their devilish pranks — to the plundering and squandering of time more precious than he or she had ever known.

It was Joan who broke the silence with the single word, 'Angel,' and a finger pointing at the round-faced cynic which ticked above his head.

'I know,' he nodded.

Hand in hand they walked down the ill-lit, echoing street. By the main door to the cathedral the tail light of a car glimmered mischievously.

'Yours?'

Harley nodded. 'I'll tell him to follow us to the hotel and collect those things.'

Joan fumbled in her pocket, withdrew a small gold cigarette-case, and pressed it into his palm. 'I saved it until the end — it's got my face in it — don't look now.'

'All right,' he said.

'All right,' she repeated. 'Yes, those are the best words — "All right." It's what you'll be?'

'You bet.'

He gave an order to the driver, and the car preceded them to the hotel.

At the bureau he collected what he had bought for the battery. American cloth, some tinned stuff, and a few books.

Then, 'Well!' he said, and carried the palm of her hand to his mouth.

'Angel.'

She followed him into the car for a second.

That was all.

It was Joan who, with a nod to the driver, gave the order to go.

Harley, looking through the small pane of glass at the back saw her standing on the pavement, a motionless figure, with hands crammed into the pockets of her reefer jacket.

25

A solitary aeroplane was dropping bombs on Péronne as the hastening car bumped over the cobbled streets. Harley, in the back seat, was leaning forward, using the light of the last of his matches to illumine Joan's face, which looked laughingly into his from the interior of a small gold cigarette-case.

No, not a cigarette-case — a talisman.

Zomp — carrahh! went the bombs.

'Smash away, you bastard,' said Harley. 'Who cares?'

What with reliefs going up to the line, a ditched lorry beyond Roisel, and ammunition columns piling up behind, it was nearly two o'clock before the car dropped Harley near the battery.

Late as was the hour, David Drayton was awake when he entered the cellar they shared together.

'Only three more days now,' said David. 'Do you know, I can't sleep for thinking about it.'

Harley nodded and looked at the black lines under the boy's eyes.

'Did you have a good time to-day?'

A good time — what description could be more inadequate?

'Yes.'

David peered into Harley's eyes with an interest that was almost womanish. What he saw seemed to perplex him.

'You look awfully queer,' he said, 'as if — I don't know — as if you'd seen a miracle.'

'P'r'aps I have, old man,' Harley admitted. ''T any rate, I've lived one.'

He sat down on a box and began to slacken the laces of his long boots.

'You wouldn't like to tell me about it?'

After all, why not?

'It's this, David. I'm going to get married my next leave.'

'I see,' said David dully. Then, 'Who?'

Harley told him.

'I see,' David repeated. 'I've guessed for a long time you would. I wonder if you'd write to Paula and tell her.'

'You'll be seeing her before a letter would arrive.'

'Yes — yes; but I'd rather you wrote — I think she'd rather, too.'

'All right, I will.'

For a longish while nothing was said.

At last, 'I expect you're happy.'

Harley gave a half laugh. 'Happy!' he repeated. 'Look here' — he opened the cigarette-case and held it out. 'No, I won't let it out of my hand — ever.'

'She's lovely,' David nodded. 'Lovely.'

Harley had turned away, and the boy shot a look, half guilty, at him.

'I feel an awful scab, Harley.'

'How do you mean?'

'About my leave — especially now.'

'Well, you're due for some.'

'I know, but there was only one allotment, and by rights you should have had it.'

'Rot!'

''Tisn't. We both came out the same day, but you'd done years of service. And now ——'

'If you are going to start worrying over rights and wrongs where leave's concerned ——' Harley began.

But David cut him short. 'The O.C. as good as told me that you could have had it, but gave it up to me.'

'He was pulling your leg,' he said.

'You can't get past with that — not a hope,' said David.

Harley waved him down. 'That's enough,' he said.

But David wasn't satisfied. 'I s'pose if I wasn't an utter scab, I'd refuse to take it.'

'And if you did, my lad, the voucher would be cancelled, and nobody'd be better off. So dry up and go to sleep and think no more about it.'

David grinned sheepishly. 'It's no use coming the senior officer with me,' he said. 'I know what I know, and I want it put on record that you are the grandest chap in France.'

'Then let's close down on that,' said Harley.

But before blowing out the candle and tumbling into his own bunk, he punched David affectionately on the shoulder, and said he was a good lad, even though he did talk like an ass in and out of season.

26

A little after dawn, two days later, Harley and David walked knee deep through an opal ground mist towards the O. Pip. Harley would gladly have done the duty alone, but since David's grant of leave, Fawlk had taken a special delight in giving the boy every job there was to do.

In this case there had been some excuse for sending two officers, for the infantry were to carry out a daylight raid on a narrow section of the front, and, as Fawlk said, 'One never knows, does one?'

The mist muffled the sound of their footfalls and provoked silence.

The first part of their journey was over fields smudged with battery positions, turf-covered funk holes and field kitchens, from which the pleasant odours of frying bacon chimed the hour as surely as a clock.

Along a sunken road they went past chubby 4.5 howitzers and slim sixty-pounders, a road which funnelled abruptly into a communication trench, all very trim and smart with new duckboards and fascines for wallpaper, and battalion headquarters with gaudy painted signs, and pleasantly disposed cooking-galleys and field dressing-stations, and many other comforts and conveniences of modern warfare. As they approached nearer to the front line, these orderly communications degenerated into a muddy rivulet whose banks were so eroded by water and shell fire as barely to afford cover. Along this rivulet men came or went, or stood at their stations in those curiously insensitive postures of mind and body which in three years of trench warfare had become second nature.

Harley, with David at his heels, pushed his way past the silently waiting men to a spot on higher ground, where a sap, about four feet in length terminating in a firing-platform, ran out towards the red hedges of barbed wire spanning No Man's Land. By the entrance to the sap an infantry colonel and three officers of the same regiment were waiting in anticipation of the raid. To right and left the men were packed tight as sardines in a tin.

Young Frost, who with a signaller was on duty in the sap, greeted Harley with a cracked grin that was half a yawn. He asked what time the show was scheduled to begin.

'In half an hour,' said Harley. 'If you hurry, you may be in time for the counter-battery stuff.'

'Thanks, then I'll take it easy,' Frost replied, and added, 'Fritz seems a bit anxious about something. Quite a lot of nasty stuff flying about. Toodle-oo.'

Gathering up his signaller with a nod, he wallowed down the trench and out of sight.

The relief signaller tested his line and accommodated himself on a wet duckboard with the field telephone on his knees. Up and down the line hostile shrapnel was beginning to splutter viciously.

'Nerves,' said the infantry colonel, bit off a piece of chocolate, and offered some to Harley. 'They always scent these minor operations. Lost four men coming up.'

For some while they conversed in fragmentary sentences.

David Drayton had moved into the sap and was rubbing his finger nails together, creating a small noise which sounded like a mouse gnawing at the wainscot. He seemed extraordinarily preoccupied with this fidgety task.

'Feeling queer or something?' Harley asked.

David shook his head. 'No, fine. It's the waiting. Always gets me, waiting does.' A pause, then, 'How long before we start to shoot?'

'Not long, old son.'

'Time goes so damn slowly since I got that leave warrant.'

Another five minutes dribbled away. Somewhere a man was clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

A voice said, 'You won't get no beer round 'ere.'

A subdued titter ran along the ranks within earshot.

'Quit that talking,' an N.C.O. barked huskily.

'Coming over with us?' the Colonel queried.

Harley shook his head. 'Not this journey. What's it look like?'

'If you fellars give us a show — all right.'

Silence again, even the hostile shrapnel had stopped crackling.

Harley felt a hand pulling at his sleeve. It was David's hand. He stepped out of the trench into the sap.

'Yes — yes, old man?'

'There's something I wanted to say.' David's voice was very low and dry. 'In case anything — I mean —— O God!'

Something struck the trench and burst with a hideous uproar a couple of feet beyond the angle round which they stood. With the feeling that his head had been shut in a steel door, Harley staggered breathless against David, beneath an avalanche of falling earth. It was a full minute before they recovered their breath and their senses, and were able to take stock of the havoc that confronted them.

The mouth of the sap had opened up funnelwise to give a view of a wide crater beyond upon whose sides reclined a number of sleeping men, in tired, careless postures.

In the centre of the group lay the Colonel, but he was not asleep. He lolled, like a Dutch doll, motionless, with his eyes open and a smile of the utmost surprise wreathing a paper-white face. The joke, whatever it may have been, was a good one, as a last joke should be.

Dizzily Harley looked to left and right. Along the trench in both directions were more tired men, lazily lolling or coiled up on the duckboards like dogs before a fire.

Beside him someone parrotted, 'Oh, my God! Oh, my God!' over and over and over again.

It was David.

'You all right?' said Harley.

'Yes, but, oh, my God!'

From left and right men came running to fill the gap left in the breached line by the careless dead.

'Time?'

'Watch stopped, sir.'

'Mine, too,' said Harley, and he jumped onto the firing-platform and reached out a hand to haul David up, as every battery on that section of the front burst into a chorus of shrieking, whirling hate.

27

A nip of whiskey from Harley's flask and heavy draughts upon his own resources of pluck kept David Drayton together through the rest of the day. But, as they stumbled home in the twilight, his legs behaved in the strangest fashion, and his hand kept smearing his mouth as though by this action some vile taste could be rubbed away. Sometimes he would stop and stare like one confronted by a hideous barrier, before which voluntary advance was powerless. Then, with a crash of laughter, he plunged blindly forward, fending off unimaginable terrors with extended hands.

Where the trench debouched into the sunken road, a corporal was mustering the remnant of a platoon. The order he gave, 'Fall in, two deep, and hold each other up,' appears in no training manual.

Harley slipped an arm round David's shoulders and coaxed him along tenderly.

'Not far to go, old son — the worst of it's over now.'

David stumbled on a few paces and stopped. 'He is sitting there laughing — laughing ——' he whispered. 'He was laughing because he was out of it. That was the joke. Did you know that was the joke?'

Harley gripped him more tightly. 'Only one more day and you'll be in England. You saved my life, old son. If you hadn't pulled me into the sap ——'

'You might have been laughing, too. Yes — yes, but that girl would have cried — and Paula — Paula ——'

'You two'll have no end of a time on leave. There are some jobs you might do for me, if you're not too busy.' Once more he urged the boy forward.

'What sort of jobs?' The tone was listless, the shrill notes of hysteria for the moment muted by a commonplace. 'What sort of jobs?' he repeated, suddenly irritable.

Harley enumerated a list of imaginary needs as long as his leg. That he wanted none of these things did not matter. The effort to memorise them was keeping David's mind from the spectral horrors of that pit.

'And one of those new self-stropping razors,' he droned; 'and you might see my tailor, too, Burwash and Raeburn, in Vigo Street, and order me some riding-bags and a new British warm.'

'I'll never remember everything.'

'Forget what you like — as much as you like. Forget everything if you can.' His voice now was low and murmurous like the hum of bees about a hive.

David's head began to nod and his eyes closed, only his feet moved to the dull rhythm of walking. The rest of his consciousness was asleep.

They reached the battery a little after eight o'clock. With the tenderness of a woman, Harley laid the boy down and covered him with a blanket.

An orderly entered, but Harley laid a finger to his lips, and followed the man outside.

'The O.C. wants you, at once, sir.'

28

Major Fawlk was seated at an improvised table in a sandbagged loose box which was doing duty as orderly room. He was alone, and his expression betokened a mood of exaggerated well-being. The 'strafe' had been a success. The Brigadier had so far forgotten his usual practice as to express satisfaction in the part played by the heavy artillery.

Fawlk acknowledged Harley's salute with a lean smile and listened to the brief report he gave, drumming his fingers the while upon the table-top.

'H'm. Nearly went up, did you?'

'Near enough, sir.'

'That would have been a pity. Is Drayton all right?'

'He was a bit shaken, sir. He did very well, though.'

'I must have a word with him.'

Harley hesitated. 'He's asleep. I think he needs it pretty badly.'

'H'm! To-morrow will do as well. Yes. I hear things will be rather lively in the near future.'

'So I understand, sir.'

'Very lively, indeed.' He stopped and looked at Harley through half-closed eyes. 'Tell me, Trevelyan, who was it you went to see at Amiens?'

'A friend, sir.'

'But what friend?'

There was no justification whatever for any such interrogation. On the other hand, if Harley were to get leave, he would have to give reasons.

'Since you ask, sir, I went to see Miller's sister.'

Fawlk raised his brows uncomprehendingly. 'Miller's sister! It is more usually the Miller's daughter, is it not? What Miller?'

'The T.O.'s sister, sir. Joan Miller.'

Fawlk put the palms of his hands flat on the table, got up and barked, 'What's that? Who?'

But Harley didn't repeat what he had said.

Fawlk's tongue ran along his lips. 'Why should you wish to see her?'

'For the best reason, sir. We are going to be married.'

'Oh,' said Fawlk. 'Oh, you are? You are? That — that's *most* interesting.'

He sat down again and made some pretence of reading a paper. But the hand that held it was trembling and he crumpled the paper into a ball and jerked it aside.

'And when?' he demanded. 'When do you propose marrying?'

'As soon as I can get leave.'

Fawlk seemed to relax. 'In that case you may have to wait a long time. I had a chit an hour ago cancelling all leave warrants — indefinitely.'

Harley sucked in a sharp breath. 'But, look here, sir, that doesn't mean young Drayton?'

'Obviously. It is not the habit of the General Staff to make exceptions.'

'In that case,' said Harley tensely, 'Drayton must see an M.O.'

Fawlk's eyes narrowed to slits. 'And why?'

'Because if ever a boy needed a break, he does. He's as near the end of his tether as no matter.'

'That is for me to decide,' said Fawlks.

'Yes, sir, but he had a nasty bump to-day and it did him no good. The knowledge that he was due for leave was about the only thing that kept him together. Take that away and ——' Harley humped his shoulders expressively.

'Captain Trevelyan,' said Fawlk, choosing his words as though they were very hard to find, 'while I command this battery, I shall run it without the advice or assistance of my subordinates. *I* do not practise favouritism, and I will not countenance its practise by any one of my officers.'

The blanket at the door was pushed aside, and Frost, his face more scarlet than usual, stumbled in.

'Sir.'

'Yes, Mr. Frost.'

'Telephone call from the O. Pip. Lamington has been hit.'

'Hit?'

'Killed, sir. Caught it in the head.'

Anxious to say more, Frost turned to Harley, but before he could speak, Fawlk cut in.

'That will do, Mr. Frost.'

'Very good, sir. Oh, sir, do you want me to go up and take over?'

'I have no recollection of having said anything but that will do, Mr. Frost.'

'Poor old Lamington,' said Frost, saluted clumsily, and went out.

Fawlk picked up the telephone. 'An orderly to ask Mr. Drayton to report here at once,' said he. As he hung up the receiver, he raised his eyes challengingly.

It was perhaps five seconds before Harley took up the challenge. 'Are you sending that boy up the line again?'

'I am. And why?'

'Because, if you don't mind, I'd like to go instead, and because, sir, to send Drayton would be a' — he checked the imprecatory adjective — 'an impractical thing to do.'

Fawlk nodded slowly. 'You are determined to question my command, Captain Trevelyan.'

Harley was holding himself on a light rein. 'No, sir. I am as keen on the discipline and efficiency of this battery as you are, and I have every right to say that a shell-shocked boy is unfit to be in charge of the O. Pip.'

Once again Fawlk nodded. 'I will put that opinion on record,' said he. 'Have you anything further to say?'

'I ask to be allowed to go instead.'

'Which is an act of heroism and self-sacrifice you will *not* be required to make.'

'Sir,' said Harley — and there was genuine appeal in his voice — 'no doubt through my own fault I have offended you, and I'm ready to take what's coming on that account, but don't take it out of a lad who's not responsible. That would be brutal.'

There was no need to reply, for at that moment David, heavy and perplexed by sleep, blundered in and stood stupidly to attention.

'Mr. Drayton,' said Fawlk, 'you will be sorry to hear Mr. Lamington has been killed at the O. Pip.'

Save that his tongue wandered over parched lips, David made no movements.

'In the circumstances you will report there for duty forthwith.'

'At the — O. — Pip, sir?'

'At the O. Pip.'

'The *same* O. Pip?'

'Certainly.'

Once more the horror to which sleep had put a merciful period gathered like a storm at the back of David's eyes, but he only said, 'Very good, sir,' and turned drunkenly towards the door.

'And, Mr. Drayton.'

David stopped. 'Sir?'

'I am sorry to say that your leave, in fact, that *all* leave has been temporarily cancelled.'

'O God!' said David Drayton.

'What was that? Turn and face me — face me, at once.' The words rattled out sharp and venomous as bullets from a machine gun.

'Was that a proper expression to use before your commanding officer? "O God!" What does it mean? What does it imply? You don't answer. You leave me to form my own conclusions, which are that they were the words of someone who is unfit to hold a commission — in short, the words of a coward.'

David seemed hardly aware of what was said until the name coward pierced his dull consciousness.

In an instant all the limpness vanished and he drew himself up taut as a steel tie. With clenched fists he took one step forward, which brought him to the table. Through shut teeth he said two words.

'Stand up!'

With the realisation of what was coming, Harley Trevelyan pivoted on his heel and faced the wall.

'Stand up!'

At the repetition, Fawlk pushed back the box on which he was seated, rose, and leaned across the table with his jaw out. So for one second boy and man faced each other, and then the boy struck. Who shall say what strength accumulated misery, hatred, indignation, and disenchantment lent to that blow? It was delivered with every particle of energy his mind and body possessed. It landed on the point of the jaw, and Fawlk, lost to all sense of time and space, crumpled and went down behind the table. David stood over him, gasping and grunting like a runner at the end of a race.

Then, 'Drayton,' said Harley, his face was still to the wall. 'You had your orders. Don't hang about. Get off at once.'

'Yes — but — but ——'

'You had your orders. Obey 'em.'

He did not look at the boy. He heard rather than saw David stumble out into the friendless night. After he had gone, he still stood without moving. Shells were bursting down the road. In that confined place their detonations sounded like the roar of hungry lions. Slowly another sound intruded itself, the scrape of boots on a stone floor, the bump and rustle of a hand falling heavily on a litter of papers, someone breathing with difficulty, and a voice coming, it seemed, from a long way off.

'Where — is — he?'

Harley turned. Propping himself against the table and rocking on his heels stood Fawlk.

'Sir?'

'Where's Drayton?'

'Gone.'

'Gone — gone. Where?'

'To carry out your orders.'

Fawlk leaned forward, peering in bewilderment.

'You were a witness, Trevelyan,' he said slowly.

'I was a witness that the orders were given.'

'Orders! Damn the orders! — Of the assault — of the blow he struck!'

'I don't understand,' came the very slow rejoinder. 'What blow?'

Abandoning the support of the table, Fawlk lurched across the floor and stared into Harley's eyes. But Harley's eyes were as barren of expression as the wall behind him.

'What blow?' he repeated.

'S-so,' said Fawlk. 'S-so.'

For a while neither spoke. Then, with a sudden resolve, Fawlk moved swiftly to the entrance and he flung the blanket aside. Against the flash of a distant shell-burst his figure resembled the silhouette of a monstrous scarecrow.

'Orderly!' he cried. 'Orderly!' And again, 'Orderly.'

An orderly came running from fifty yards away.

'Sir!'

'Follow Mr. Drayton towards the O. Pip. Instruct him to return at once.'

'Very good, sir.'

Once more he turned to Harley. 'You know what this means? He will be shot.'

'On your word alone?' said Harley. 'On your word alone?'

'I fancy that his word will be more damning than mine — or your silence.'

'The word of a shell-shocked boy — which I shall deny — deny?'

Fawlk moved to the table and picked up the telephone.

'Put that down,' said Harley, 'and listen to me. To-night you gave a needless order to a boy who was in no fit state to carry it out. You followed it up with the brutal announcement that his leave had been cancelled. You knew what the result would be, because I'd warned you. But even so, your foul conceit wasn't satisfied — and, like the swine you are, you called him a coward. If you want my evidence at the court martial, you can have it. But that evidence ends with the word "coward" and with a boy who went out into the night. If your imagination can supply a sequel — and, by God, I can think of a just one — go ahead and prove it — alone.'

Fawlk pushed the telephone aside and sat at the table with his clenched hands stretched out before him.

'We will continue this discussion when Mr. Drayton returns,' he said.

But David Drayton did not return.

Presently an orderly came running with the news that his body had been picked up beside a fresh shell hole at the crossroads. A scimitar of flying steel had torn the heart from his breast. He was dead and smiling, sharing the jest, perhaps, that all day long had haunted his imagination, or learning, perhaps, the truth of what Harley had said that a laugh can help a man no end on an awkward journey.

When the orderly had gone, Harley lifted his arms and let them fall in a gesture that touched the foundations of despair. Barely above a whisper he said, 'Poor old boy — poor old boy. It settles his account.'

'Ours remains open,' said a voice behind him.

29

It was a strange pulsating world that Harley entered as he passed from the O.C.'s quarters — a world in which the earth's crust trembled to the rhythm of marching hosts, the clot, clot, of cavalry squadrons, the jingling of field guns, the burring of tanks, the moan of motor-lorries and tractors, and the splutter and clank of caterpillars hauling 'heavies' into the line.

Of the mighty concentration of troops and war material which poured into the Cambrai front that November night in 1917, an epic might be written. Unexpected, unannounced, from the back areas, from north and south they came. In lorries, buses, trains, Décauvilles, G.S. wagons, on horses, cycles, mounted and afoot — hour by hour they mustered as clouds gather before a storm.

There is no parallel in the whole history of the war for the activities of that night. A new spirit had been born in everyone — a new determination to be done with the whole business, to knock out, wipe out, and overwhelm any and every combination of defence which might oppose the path to victory. A triumph of silent, swift, and deadly organisation was afoot — the launching of a new, unadvertised form of attack. A whirlwind barrage, a sector of the enemy lines breached and crushed flat by a wall of Juggernaut tanks, and an open road for the cavalry to ride through.

Nothing was forgotten or left to chance. Even the exact minute was stated when the R.E.s should have patched up the broken roads that spanned No Man's Land for the guns, ammunition columns, and supplies to follow at the heels of the advancing army. Before this perfection of design and administration, failure or collapse was unthinkable.

Yet, although in England that night joy-bells rang from steeples and excited patriots fired rockets and shook hands with each other and called for beer, failure and collapse was the final accountancy. A fog — a low, white, clinging fog, in which regiments fumbled like lost children — was to blame. A fog and the fortuitous presence of a reserve division travelling north at the back of the German lines and decanted from trains and flung into the breach.

And presently the cavalry were riding back whence they had come, and the tanks went rumbling down the road, and the infantry dug themselves in, and the guns settled down like old hens who sun themselves in an orchard. And the gentlemen who drew the war maps for newspapers made nice little semicircles bulging eastward from the old familiar trench line and filled them in with a cross-hatch of grey that all who should behold might rejoice.

The lightning offensive — the first phase of the battle of Cambrai — had ended in a stalemate.

30

In the turmoil of those mad days there had been no time for private animosities. Fawlk and Harley had worked in seeming forgetfulness of what had taken place the night before the attack was launched. But with the stopping of the machine and with little to occupy them but the dull routine of a battery situated in a quiet sector of the line, consciousness of each other awoke.

Although no word was spoken, Harley was aware that Fawlk was watching him as a cat watches — crouched and balanced for a spring.

That what he had done was contrary to all military principles did not cause Harley an instant of sorrow or unrest. Had David lived and been court-martialled, he would have sworn — as he could in perfect truth have sworn — that he had seen nothing. That much he owed to Paula — to David — to a sense of justice and fair play that could never be influenced by King's Regulations and the manual of Military Law.

But, although the incident was apparently closed, Harley was aware that it would never be forgotten or forgiven. He had made an enemy whose determination to knife him in the dark would never waver or falter.

The weight of responsibility shouldered with David Drayton had not been lifted by David's death. Harley had written to Paula. It was the hardest and worst job he had ever been called upon to tackle. Sheet after sheet he tore up and started afresh. There was so little to say and sympathy is the poorest comforter. He tried to tell her what a fine soldier David had been, and only succeeded in creating a false, unrecognisable personality that suggested a composite impression of Sir Garnet Wolseley, 'Bobs,' and Lord Kitchener. This, too, he destroyed. To Paula there was no such soldier in David, and Harley was uncertain what Paula's David was like. Probably an unkempt schoolboy — with sudden bursts of affection, athleticism, bad temper, and moods of extreme contempt for authority, or just someone to look after, and pretend things about — a boy.

An impossible letter to write.

That he ever succeeded in writing it is because he gave up trying and let his pencil run. Which it did very simply, naturally, and sincerely.

Also he wrote to Joan, asking her when she should return to go and see Paula, and then, with a flash of intuition, postscripted, 'Better not, perhaps.'

David Drayton's death had dulled the fine edge of his own happiness.

31

Siege Battery 007 had taken up a position in the orchard of a farm which until the last few days had been immune from the severities of war. In their retreat the enemy had exploded a bomb inside the house, which had blown away the staircase, the upper floors, and the roof. There remained, however, moderately good cellar accommodation, and the outbuildings were intact. In one of these, reinforced by sandbags and a sheet of elephant iron, Harley took up his quarters. The place, which in peace-time had been used as a harness room, measured about eight by five and was innocent of any window. But it was dry, it boasted a stone floor and a massive chestnut door opening outward. By comparison with the average battery billet, it was a place of refinement and comfort.

The guns were screened from aërial observation by leafy nets spread over the branches of apple trees. Beyond a certain amount of registration on duly located enemy positions, there was little work to do. The detachments were mainly employed in recharging the recuperators, in tightening glands, in alignment and sight tests, and other mechanical duties. For the rest, they loafed about, kicked a football up and down the farm-yard, leaned against walls, talked about beer and 'Blighty' and women, and were heavily bored.

The war, which, for a few glorious hours of hope and uncertainty, had proved itself worth while, had become a nuisance again.

The success of the counter-attack launched on a grey November dawn, a few days later, may have been largely due to this apathy. A hurricane of shells lasting only a few minutes and followed by recurrent waves of infantry annihilated the flimsy defences and overwhelmed practically every battery in that sector of the front.

Once more the door to Amiens — to Paris — to a German victory — was open wide.

Harley was asleep when it began. The first news of the catastrophe was when a rabble of infantry, their backs to the enemy, poured through the battery position.

Sauve qui peut.

Fawlk, in pyjamas and a British warm, gripped one of the runaways to demand an explanation. He got it.

'Fritz — on top of us — millions of 'em.'

The man wriggled free and ran.

A signaller appeared — bewildered and stupid.

'Siege Park — Tractors, at once,' Fawlk commanded.

The signaller dived below.

Less than a mile away were seen the advance guard of those masses in field grey. They were moving slowly, casually, like men out for a stroll.

The battery personnel in all stages of undress were at the guns now.

'Open sights at four hundred yards,' was the order.

In the roar that followed, Fawlk shot a glance at the door of Harley's billet — that massive door of chestnut.

'Trevelyan,' he called.

'Sir,' sounded from within.

'Get dressed and come here.'

'Anything wrong?'

'No, but get dressed.'

'Coming right away, sir.'

A roof timber was lying at Fawlk's feet; stooping, he picked it up and laid it against a panel of the door, wedging the other end firmly into the ground.

Like a clumsy elephant, Frost came plunging up the steps of the cellar. Fawlk was twenty feet away from the door of Harley's billet when Frost stood panting before him.

'Orders — Heavy Artillery — retire.'

Increasing numbers of those grey figures were pouring over the skyline. A barrage of shrapnel, bright and stinging, burst overhead.

'Very well, Mr. Fawlk.'

And then pandemonium.

Orders — swiftly yelled and repeated. A final bark from number three, a crackle of musketry, shouts, a scream, and the sound of a man's fists pummelling on a door.

Fawlk did not look back as he moved to where the car waited down the road. He did not even waste a glance at those four silent guns, which, like great black toads, crouched in the orchard. The faces of men who raced past him were twisted with fear — and the shame of retreat. His own was untroubled — was expressionless. He even smiled.

A little way down the road he saw Freddie Miller.

Freddie Miller was standing on the footboard of a tractor, one of four which, rolling like ships at sea, were racing up to the line.

Freddie was cursing every man and every obstacle in the road. Among other things he cursed the Major's car.

'Out of the way, you bloody rats!' he cried.

There can be very little doubt what Freddie Miller's fate would have been had not a couple of retreating machine-gunners paused in amazement at the spectacle of someone running towards rather than away from the enemy. Inspired by his enthusiasm, they set up their spitfire upon its tripod and checked the advance before the battery position until such a time as Freddie had coupled up two of the guns to the tractors and despatched them down the road in the direction of safety. It is probable he might have saved the other guns had not the driver of the third tractor in eagerness and confusion reversed into a shell hole and blocked the farm road. In face of this calamity, the machine-gunners and the remaining drivers took to flight.

Alone and unsupported, Freddie Miller made a fruitless and perspiring attempt to reverse the one remaining tractor through a gap in the hedge and all but succeeded when a bullet smashed the carburettor and the engine stopped. Crouching behind the bonnet, Freddie took stock of his chances of escape and saw that they were not good. He crawled head first into a litter of straw and leaves that lay in a heap beside the road.

32

Through a seam in the panelling of the massive door that held him prisoner, Harley Trevelyan watched the first wave of German infantry sweep over the battery position. There was little evidence of enthusiasm or triumph. The faces of those who came within range of Harley's observation wore expressions of bewilderment at the ease with which the attack had been carried out.

Harley, who could speak German with some fluency, overheard one man say to another, 'Surely something worse than this is in store for us.'

The whole affair was without precedent — a walk-over.

The door of the harness room was flung open. With his hands in his trousers pockets, Harley walked into a bristle of bayonets.

A young German officer, almost a boy, looked him up and down in a mixture of surprise and admiration.

'Thunder and lightning!' he said, 'but you're a cool one.'

Harley did not return the smile, but he asked, 'Do we take prisoners to-day — or not, Mein Herr?'

'We do,' was the answer and from the ranks behind came a grunt of approval.

An order was given and a blue-jowled Bavarian placed himself at Harley's side.

'Other prisoners will be coming back,' said the officer boy. 'You will keep this officer here and join up with the first party that comes this way.'

He clicked his heels, saluted Harley, mustered his men and led them onward.

With despair gnawing at his soul, Harley Trevelyan sat on an oil drum and watched wave after wave of the victorious army sweep through the battery position. His sensations were not enviable in that moment of shame and impotence. Prisoned behind a wedged door, he had not even the satisfaction of having taken part in the defence of the battery. The work of three years lay before him broken and useless.

For three quarters of an hour men and war material poured over the landscape. The ground trembled to the rhythm of marching feet. The air rang with the clatter and jingle of artillery and limbers. Every moment Harley expected parties of prisoners to pass that way, but none came, and at the end of an hour he and the Bavarian were the only men alive as far as the eye could see. The war had passed over them and beyond.

There was something uncanny about the isolation and the loneliness that had descended upon them. It seemed to have pierced the heavy imagination of the Bavarian, who, until then, had stood an immovable statue, watching Harley with a finger caressing the trigger of his rifle.

'Back,' said he. 'Get back into your hole.' And without waiting for Harley to obey, pushed him into the harness room and wedged the door.

'Cold feet,' thought Harley, but a moment later through the crack in the panel he realised that he was wrong.

The man was robbing the dead.

For perhaps twenty minutes this ghoulish business proceeded with a thoroughness that argued familiarity. To see the bodies of men with whom for the last three years he had been on terms of friendship and affection subjected to this treatment was torture, and when, later, the door was thrown open, Harley's face was white with a passionate desire to kill.

The muzzle of the rifle was trained upon the pit of his stomach and the Bavarian was looking at him with a greedy light in his small pig-like eyes.

'Turn out your pockets,' grunted the man, 'and if you try any tricks I'll dig out your liver with this bayonet.'

It is doubtful if the loss of a few pounds and some personal odds and ends would have weighed with Harley in the circumstances in which he found himself. Beside the freedom he had lost, the rest was of little account. But Joan's picture in the little cigarette-case was in his breast-pocket and the thought of surrendering it to this robber of dead men drove prudence to the winds.

'Then take this for a start,' he said, and kicked the oil drum at the Bavarian with sudden and surprising energy.

It was a desperate and seemingly hopeless thing to do, but luck favoured him. The drum struck the man's bayonet and deflected the bullet by a hair's breadth. An instant later, they were locked together in an inextricable tangle of writhing legs and arms.

It was not a gentlemanly fight. The Bavarian had weight as well as strength, and, getting astride Harley, made a valiant attempt to cut his head off with the raw edge of the oil drum, but as he raised it Harley's left hand fastened on his throat like the jaws of a dog. The drum fell from the man's grasp and he gripped Harley's wrist. Harley dragged his right hand free and seizing the Bavarian by the forearm crashed his elbow on the brick floor and broke the bone. With a scream of agony, the Bavarian slewed over and fastened his teeth in Harley's shoulder, at the same time driving his knee into Harley's stomach. Harley's breath deserted him with a screech. His hand, releasing its grip, swept the floor and encountered a hairbrush. It was a common hairbrush with a handle. He had bought it at Doullens, having lost his own in a battery shift. When a man is lying on top of you trying with his teeth to gnaw a way through to your carotid artery, it is not easy to kill him with a hairbrush. But anything is worth trying in an extremity. Harley knew if he failed the Bavarian would take Joan's picture. That was unthinkable, and it lent him vigour. He hooked the brush down with a crash on the base of the man's skull. But as well he might have hit the stone floor beneath them. He tried again, lower down, using the edge, a rabbit punch in the nape of the neck.

The Bavarian made a sick sort of noise and reared himself up dizzily. Harley changed the brush from the left hand to his right and smote again with every ounce of his strength. The brush cut a groove in the frontal bone. But the man was not dead. He struggled to his feet like a drunk and looked vaguely about him for his fallen rifle.

But Harley reached it first, slipped a bullet in the breech, and blew out his brains.

The Bavarian sat down quite peacefully in the corner of the harness room, and Harley was sick.

33

Sandwiched between the German advance and their reserves at the back, Harley Trevelyan stumbled from the harness room into an empty and neglected world. Not a soul was to be seen. For company he had only the dead and the black, deserted guns. The guns!

An idea was slowly forming in his mind. Had those two guns been put out of action before the retreat? It would be worth finding out. Rocking drunkenly, he followed the farm road towards number three. The way led him by a litter of straw and rubbish which heaved up amazingly before his eyes. Then a voice croaked. 'Harley — good God!'

He thought at first his imagination was playing tricks, but the man with straw in his hair certainly looked like Freddie Miller, and sounded like him.

But why — how?

'That's easily told,' said Freddie. 'Got left trying to pull out the guns. But how did you get back?'

Harley shook his head. 'Didn't — never left. Door of my billet was jammed somehow — falling roof timber, I suppose. Was taken prisoner.'

'Then?'

'Didn't you hear that shot?'

'D'you mean?'

Harley nodded. He was in no mood to give explanations. Freddie vanished in the direction of the harness room and returned whistling.

'You're a nut,' he said. Then, 'What do we do next?'

Harley shrugged his shoulders indifferently. 'Not much. We're bound to be collared before long. But until we are' — and he stiffened suddenly — 'until we are, we might be useful.'

'How?'

He indicated how, and in the next hour the breech blocks of the two remaining guns and of three other batteries in that vicinity were dropped with a succession of dull splashes into the farm well.

They did not talk. The work occupied all their attention. Sweating and exultant, they went to and fro between the well and the guns. So occupied were they that even expectations of interference did not oppress them.

The monstrous unreality of the whole business had infected them with an excitement to which words could give no expression. Until the last breech block had been committed to the water, they did not consider the future so far as it concerned themselves.

'Now what?' said Freddie, his face gleaming with sweat. 'Now what, old son? We might lie low and try to wriggle through during the night. It's odds against them having any kind of connected line.'

Harley nodded, but his appetite for putting guns out of action was not yet satisfied.

'Or we might snoop along towards Villers Guislan and have a look at those 9.2s.'

'I'm game,' said Freddie. ''T any rate, we could try.'

Keeping in the shelter of a low hedge, they started north. Beyond a few distant figures, they saw no one. They had gone a quarter of a mile when Harley stopped.

'Got a gun?' he asked.

Freddie shook his head and cursed.

'No? Neither have I.'

He looked about him, but there were no dead.

Freddie pointed at a roofless cottage near by.

'Let's have a dekko. Might be some officer's kit about.'

There was no sign of life near the cottage, but they approached it cautiously and listened beneath a shuttered window.

'Not a sound,' said Freddie. 'Come on.'

They turned the corner and found themselves confronted by three men grinning pleasantly behind the sights of their rifles.

'Finis,' said Freddie. Then, in the most execrable German, 'All right, Hindenburg, threes beat a pair in any game of chance.'

34

Their captors were so far removed from the accepted idea of the brutal and licentious soldiery of the

Kaiser as to have broken the heart of a patriotic leader writer. They were, in fact, men of simple minds and non-barbarous inclinations. What they were doing in that ruinous cottage when their brothers in arms were engaged in mortal combat is a question to which it would be hard to find a satisfactory answer. Outward evidence proved that they had been disturbed while enjoying an orgy of bully beef as supplied to the B.E.F.

That the presence of Harley and Freddie provided them with more embarrassment than satisfaction was apparent by the extreme diffidence with which they presented their rifles and a subsequent discussion as to what they were to do with the 'verdammt' officers now they had captured them. To the conspicuously private soldier, the uniform of an officer — even hostile — is provocative of discomfort.

The long and short of it was that they were not at all pleased with their capture.

Away to the north, where the roofs of Villers Guislan poked their broken ribs through the mist, a barrage of British shells had begun to fall. Towards that evidence that some, at least, of the British artillery was still on the map, Harley looked with affection.

Meanwhile, the debate as to their future disposition proceeded to an accompaniment of nods and grunts and expressions of disapproval.

'But the orders were precise,' one man insisted. 'All prisoners were to be taken to Fourgh la Rivière.'

'But not a man of us knows where Fourgh lies,' was the retort.

It was then Harley spoke for the first time. 'I can show you the way.'

The trio looked at him in surprise. Raising his hand, Harley pointed at Villers Guislan.

'But that isn't ——' Freddie began, and stopped at a glare from Harley.

'Humph!' grunted one of the men. 'That would seem no place to go.'

Harley laughed sourly. 'Is this the way you obey orders?' he asked. 'If a British soldier were ordered to go to a certain place, he would go if shells were falling as thick as rain.'

Although this vainglorious announcement had some effect, it did not materially shake the reluctance they shared to expose themselves to unnecessary hazard.

'One could wait until the barrage lifts,' one of them supposed.

'Or one could wait for a court-martial,' said Harley.

'He is right,' said the oldest of the three. 'If we were found here, it would be hard to explain. Please God, things may be quieter when we arrive.'

But as they approached the little town, the barrage showed no signs of lifting. The nervousness of their escort communicated itself through the points of the bayonets that pricked the fabric of Harley's tunic and Freddie's.

'What's the idea?' Freddie whispered, with a tremor of nervousness in his voice.

'God knows, mad enough,' was the reply. 'Some of these blokes may get killed. It's our one chance.'

'I guessed that was in your head,' Freddie nodded, 'but we may cop it ourselves.'

'No,' said Harley, with sudden force. 'I'm not going to die yet — I feel that. I'm going to live and marry Joan, understand, understand?'

'By God,' said Freddie, 'she'd love you for this, old son. It's rank crazy lunacy, but, by God, she'd love you for it.'

As they entered the outskirts of the village, their escort halted automatically. The whole place was crackling with fireworks like a gala night on the Riviera. The air hummed with flying fragments, and the row was such that they could hardly hear themselves speak.

Harley turned with the light of adventure in his eyes. 'What are we waiting for?' he demanded.

As he spoke, there was a splitting crash and one of the men sprawled at his feet.

For an instant the two who remained stood indecisively; then one of them cried, 'If this is Fourgh la Rivière, you can enter it alone,' and, seizing Freddie Miller by the wrist, he started to drag him round the corner.

'Drop that!' cried Freddie, and struggled to be free. The other man drew back his bayonet to lunge.

Harley had taken a step forward when with a clatter like the smashing of a thousand dinner plates an avalanche of tiles, lath, and plaster showered down overwhelmingly and brought him to the ground. One, two, three, four, the shells crackled, and at the fourth crash the light of the sky was blotted out. The wreckage of a house enveloped him. He tried to move his legs, but they were pinioned by a roof timber. He tried to shout, but his throat was choked with dust. Waves of insensibility were creeping over him, deadening pain and consciousness. He rolled his head, and through a gap in the wreckage saw Freddie Miller standing alone in the roadway. Freddie was rocking to and fro. His hands were clasped to his forehead like a man striving to remember something. Blood was running between his fingers. His face, somehow, had become like the face of a child — a lost child. In a lull between shell bursts, Harley heard him whining, 'What am I looking for — looking for?'

There was no answer.

'Freddie! Freddie!' Harley croaked, but the barrage was roaring again and smothered his voice.

Still holding his head and moving furtively, Freddie tottered out of sight.

'No go, Joan,' said Harley. 'No go.'

And passed into unconsciousness.

35

A little after dawn the following day, a man whose forehead was clotted with dried blood stumbled into Siege Park Headquarters and sat down lumpily on the floor.

'Mither av God!' cried Major Cosmo Regan, 'if it isn't Freddie Miller!'

'Is that who I am?' said the man, and began to laugh.

He was still laughing when they put him on the hospital train for Boulogne.

36

Joan did not read the casualty lists. That was a job for people who didn't believe — who didn't know. If they found a name in the lists, it was their fault for looking. One had to believe, or anything might happen.

It was Paula who brought the news. She arrived after midnight — after the front door had been bolted and the household was in bed.

Joan came down in pyjamas.

Paula was facing the embers of a dying fire. Her arms stretched out along the mantel shelf. She looked crucified.

'Well,' said Joan, from the doorway. Paula did not turn. 'On the table,' she whispered huskily

Joan picked up the cutting and read:

'Temp. Capt. Harley Everard Trevelyan, R.A., missing, believed killed.'

'Well,' Joan repeated.

'Missing — believed killed.' The words were barely audible.

'Who believes that?' said Joan. 'Who believes that? Not I.' There was not a tremor in her voice. 'I should have *known*,' she added.

Paula turned. Her face was grey as ash. 'First David, and now ——'

'Stop!' said Joan. 'What's the use? Here.'

Going to the sideboard, she poured some brandy in a glass and gave it to Paula. Then, 'I tell you I should have known,' she repeated.

Something in the words — a proprietorship — the suggestion of a stronger, surer instinct, nettled Paula to a flash of defiance.

'We both loved him. You were not the only one.'

'Yes, we both loved him,' Joan answered slowly. 'And can go on loving him. Do you understand?'

Joan lit a cigarette and threw it unsmoked into the fire. She wanted only to be alone — to think things out — to reassure herself. Faith was so hard to sustain in company with an unbeliever. The text of a sermon indifferently remembered was echoing in her brain. It said — what did it say? 'Hold that fast which thou hast that no man take thy crown.' That was it almost. That was the meaning. Belief was her crown, her support, and Paula was trying to rob her of it.

'I'm sorry,' she said, and with a gesture that was *gauche* in its sincerity, she bumped a fist on Paula's shoulder. 'I know what you've lost — and how awful it must be for you. But can't you hang on to what is left?'

Paula shook her head. 'No — I can't. I'm tired of cheating myself. For months I've done nothing else. For months did I say? — for years. The war will be over, I told myself, before David can be called up. Harley has a charmed life, I told myself; nothing can touch him — and God will reward love with love. All that and more I told myself and forced my imagination to accept it as the truth. You — you are only just beginning to play that game — the game of make-believe that cheats you every time. Sometimes I've sat for hours with my fingers pressed to my eyes, turning bullets by will power — turning them aside. Forging shields, I used to call it. Forging shields.' Her voice broke in a hard, cracked laugh. 'God! A lot of use it's been!'

Joan put out a hand and helped her to rise. 'I want you to go,' she said. 'We are no help to each other. We'd be better alone.'

Like someone in a dream Paula suffered herself to be led from the room. As the front door was opened, air-raid signals began to pop and bang over the black roofs of London.

Paula stiffened in every muscle. 'It was in a raid he first came to you,' she said. 'It's only fitting he ——'

'Oh, go!' said Joan, and stamped her foot.

An old British warm of Freddie's was hanging in the hall. Joan took it from the peg and put it on. Going to the kitchen, she rummaged in a drawer for a screw-driver. Presently she climbed to the top of the house with a flight of short steps on her shoulder. Old Rogers had not made a good job of screwing down the trapdoor that gave access to the leads. By the time Joan had removed the last screw and scrambled through the trap, the air raid was in full swing.

'Please, God,' said Joan, her gaze travelling up and beyond the tall rays of the searchlights. 'Please, God, if I am wrong in my belief, please, God, try and arrange something for me.'

But although bombs roared sullenly and fragments of broken shell cases rained down from the heavens, not so much as the tiniest splinter fell upon the roof, where for an hour Joan stood motionless.

The storm whirled away into the distance to die out in a twinkle of stars. From the street below came the clear notes of a bugle.

'All clear!'

'All clear,' Joan repeated, filled her lungs deep with the night air, and walked firmly towards the trapdoor.

She met her mother on the bathroom landing.

'It wasn't much,' said Lady Miller.

'No,' Joan echoed. 'Not much, after all.'

Lady Miller peered at her. 'You look so funny, dear,' she said, 'as if you'd been frightened, but had got over it.'

'I was, and I have got over it,' Joan nodded. 'It's in the paper that Harley is missing and believed killed.'

Lady Miller did not say anything for a moment, but when at last she spoke, she was inspired. 'You shouldn't have gone on the roof, Joan. You know he doesn't like you to.'

'He doesn't like it,' Joan repeated, and began to cry for happiness.

37

In the weeks that followed, Joan's belief had little support from outside sources.

There was Freddie to think about, too. Freddie, who was lying at the Third London General Hospital with a nasty dent in his forehead and a gap in his memory. He talked incessantly, but incoherently — a jumble of disconnected words and sentences — traversing a diversity of subjects, but focussing upon no one in particular.

'Shuffle the four aces to the top of the pack, pull 'em back with your thumb, and start dealing the fifth card down. Simple stuff — simple as dropping breech blocks down a well. You are a nut, Harley, walking these Fritzies straight into our barrage — she'd love you for it — Joan would. He's got it in the guts all right. Good-bye-ee — don't cry-ee, wipe the tear, baby dear, from your eye-ee. Come hup, little lidy — come hup, my lil' beauty. Not afride of a bit of a ditch — threes beat a pair in any game. "I'm not going to die, Freddie — going to marry Joan — Understand?" What a nut! Shuffle the four aces to — "You called me baby doll a year ago." But he was gone — gone — I looked everywhere — just a heap of bricks.'

Joan, sitting beside the bed, tried to make sense of it all.

The M.O. in charge of the case was hopeful. He said pressure was the trouble. A bit of bone pressing on the brain. Duesley was going to take a look at him and would probably operate. Marvellous chap, Duesley.

'When?' Joan asked.

'He's in France until the end of the month. When he gets back. He saw your brother the night he arrived, and told us to keep him quiet for a bit.'

A letter from Major Regan, of the Siege Park, shed a little light on Freddie's doings.

> Pulled out a couple of guns and got left behind trying to save the rest. He seems to have wriggled through the new German lines after dark. I've put in a strong recommendation, and it won't be my fault if he doesn't get something pretty good out of the hat.

The War Office could supply no further news of Harley.

One night, three weeks later, when Joan returned from the Hospital, Rogers told her that Major Evan Fawlk had been waiting in the drawing-room for half an hour.

'Tell him I'll come directly,' she said.

But before going up, Joan sponged her face and drank a glass of cold water.

Fawlk was standing when Joan entered the room. He had been standing for the last half-hour. He was proud of his height and believed in first impressions.

As she approached, he bowed very formally.

'It is so long since we last met,' he said, 'that I hardly expect you will remember me.'

'Yes, I do,' said Joan.

He bowed again, and was aware as he did so that his heart was beating unusually fast. She was lovelier than his memory's portrait of her. The pictures in the illustrated papers had only hinted at her beauty. It would be difficult, he felt, to sustain the rôle he had set himself of sympathetic friend.

'You will understand, I hope, why I am here,' he said. 'In the battery I once commanded you had a very great friend.'

'Once commanded?' Joan echoed.

Fawlk nodded. 'Before the débâcle of a few weeks ago. Since then I have been attending a course at Woolwich.'

'I see; I didn't know,' said Joan. 'I didn't know the battery was lost altogether.'

'We were able to save only two of the guns.'

'We? Oh, yes. My brother ——'

'Yes, he did very well, I believe, in trying circumstances. I am sorry to hear he was hurt, but glad it was no worse than that.'

'You believe,' said Joan. 'You were not there to see what happened?'

Fawlk shook his head. 'To my undying regret, no. We had orders to retire. There was no reason to suppose the tractors could arrive in time. The roads, too, were choked with —— You can imagine for yourself what a disorganised retreat is like.'

'Then no one was left at the battery when the tractors arrived.'

'In effect, no. We had had a number of casualties. It was an ugly business, Miss Miller; a business that scarcely bears thinking upon.'

But Joan was thinking — thinking hard.

'Was Captain Trevelyan among the wounded?' she asked.

Fawlk rubbed his chin as though uncertain how to answer.

'Not to my knowledge. You will understand the whole affair was over almost before one realised it had begun. Trevelyan was in his quarters. The position was under very heavy shell fire. I personally called him to come at once.'

'Yes, and then?'

'He answered me — but after that I never saw him.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just that. I never saw him. He did not report for duty. I had a hundred and one things to do and only a few seconds to do them in.'

Joan jumped suddenly to her feet. 'You mean he stayed under cover?'

Fawlk held up a hand in protest. 'I beg you to form no such conclusion. Trevelyan was a capable and, as I know from personal experience, a valiant officer.'

'Then why say ——'

'I have not said so. Neither do I suggest it. If Trevelyan stayed under cover, he did not do so voluntarily.'

'I don't understand.'

'Miss Miller,' said Fawlk, in a low voice, 'we were not dug in. We were billeted in the ruins of a farm. During the attack the building suffered many direct hits.' He allowed his words a moment to sink in before proceeding. 'I would give a great deal to avoid saying this — to you — to anyone who was fond of Trevelyan; but knowing him as I did, I can conceive of only one cause that would have prevented Trevelyan from carrying out his duties.'

'I see,' said Joan, steadily. 'Yes, I see.'

'Had there been time, I would have satisfied myself — or rather I should say, have verified my fears. I deeply regret I was unable to do so.'

Joan was silent. He could tell at a glance that her mind was busy with thoughts of her own. It did not seem possible that a woman who really loved a man could have listened so disinterestedly to what he had been saying. The underlying suggestion that Harley had been killed while staying under cover had brought an angry flush to her cheeks, but he was subtle enough to realise that her anger was inspired by the suggestion rather than from any acceptance of the fact. He had extricated himself rather cleverly from the position into which he had put himself. It was adroit to have accused her of holding an opinion he, for one, refused to share or countenance.

'Tell me,' she said at last, 'it was you who reported him as a casualty?'

'He was included in the lists at my direction. The phrasing was, of course, formal.'

'Ah,' said Joan. 'That is what I meant — what I wanted to know.'

'I gave the same facts to the authorities that I have given to you.'

He picked up his hat and cane from a table.

'One minute,' said Joan. 'Was there any time when Captain Trevelyan walked with my brother and some Fritzies right into our barrage?'

The lumps of super-orbital fat on Fawlk's brow drew together perplexedly. 'How could such a thing have happened? Until that day the battery personnel had never been actually in contact with the enemy.'

'Until that day — that morning!' Joan cried, a sudden radiance dancing in her eyes. 'Then it was after — *after*. Major Fawlk, I can't begin to tell you what this visit of yours has meant to me. You've put my hopes on both feet.'

Nibbling the ends of his moustache, Fawlk looked at her in surprise. How his visit could have achieved so undesirable an object defeated his imagination. Nothing had been more remote from his intentions. Probably her excitement had no better foundation than the incorrigible optimism women display in face of disaster. But it was very mysterious. Only one advantage arose from it — the tacit hostility of her attitude had vanished and in its place she was regarding him in an almost friendly light. Now, if ever, was the moment to foster the seeds of that friendship.

He took her hand, bowed over it, walked to the door, and turned.

'Miss Miller,' he said. 'I am little more than a visitor in this city. Most of my life, as your father knows, has been spent in the wild places of this world.'

'Well,' she said.

'It would be rank impertinence to presume that my society could be anything but a bore to a girl like yourself.'

'You are going to ask me to lunch,' said Joan, with a touch of her old insolence.

'You have only to refuse,' he replied, 'but if you were to accept, we should at least have one subject in common.'

Joan wrinkled her forehead, then smiled. 'All right. We'll make it one day next week — on a certain condition.'

He made no attempt to disguise his pleasure. 'Any condition you care to impose.'

'It is that we do not discuss the one subject we have in common.'

'But I meant Trevelyan,' he said, in surprise.

'So did I,' said Joan. 'Good-bye, and thank you for coming.'

'I may ring up?'

'Surely you may — good-bye.'

He left the house elated — if a trifle bewildered.

38

Triumphs and disasters have a knack of running three abreast. The return of Duesley from France, followed by an immediate and successful operation upon Freddie, occurred on the same day as the arrival of a letter from Harley and an amendment of the report of his casualty by the War Office.

Mercifully the gap in Freddie's memory was not filled in until after the letter had been received.

Emerging into consciousness from the anæsthetic, Freddie saw Joan beside his bed. 'I looked for him everywhere, old girl, but it was no use,' he wailed, in a strangled voice.

'He's found. He's all right,' Joan whispered.

'Oh, God!' said Freddie, began to cry, but went to sleep instead.

Joan read Harley's letter over and over again.

> There must have been a shell hole in the road that wanted filling and the rubbish lying atop of me was convenient for the purpose. When they lifted the beam off my chest, I got my senses back for a minute. I heard one of the fellows say I was a goner. He suggested using me as ballast for the hole. But I managed to say 'Don't,' and they didn't. After that I passed out again. Concussion. I had had a pretty severe bat on the head. My identity disc, which I wore on my wrist, must have been torn off when the house fell on me. They didn't know who I was until three weeks later, when I told 'em. They are not a bad crowd, taking 'em by and large, but I think there must be an order against smiling before prisoners. It's a wonder they don't make their heads ache frowning and looking baleful. —

Joan had difficulty in reading this last sentence, because it had been scratched out by a censor. Followed a glowing account of Freddie's doings, also edited to the verge of incomprehensibility.

I wonder if he got through all right....
A grand chap.

There was not one word of Harley's love for her in the whole letter. But at the end he said, 'I have my picture of you, although it cost a man's life to keep it.'

Joan gloried in his reticence, gloried in the resolute refusal to share their intimacy with enemy censorship departments. It made her tingle with pride of him. That was the sort of man! That was the sort!

She was writing her reply when the telephone rang. It was Fawlk. Would to-morrow do?

'Yes,' she shouted.

'Then I will order a little lunch at the Berkeley.'

'Order a big one,' said she, and hung up the receiver.

Fawlk had not read the casualty lists and was unprepared for the radiance of his visitor. Joan was wearing her prettiest frock, and she entered the foyer of the hotel with a sprightliness that defied rivalry.

Unaware of anything to account for these outward manifestations of well-being, Fawlk flattered himself that he was their inspiration.

Going forward quickly, he bowed over her hand. 'You look lovelier than a rainbow,' he said.

Joan laughed. 'You must offer me something more substantial than that,' said she. 'I am famished. I could eat a house.'

She preceded him to their table, smiling and nodding to various acquaintances as she went.

The table was banked high with a special order of roses. Joan frowned at them and pointed. Only one man was allowed to buy roses for her in bulk. A waiter, following the direction of her finger, smiled understandingly.

'The very pick of the gardens,' he said.

'Take them all away,' Joan ordered.

'But ——' Fawlk began.

'Take them all away,' she insisted. 'I want plenty of room for the food. This is a celebration.'

'I agree,' he said, 'but I thought ——'

'Off with them,' Joan insisted.

Concealing his disappointment, Fawlk gave orders for their removal.

Over the empty table he made an effort to recover himself. 'It was hardly fair to the flowers,' he said, 'exposing their poor pretensions before such a rival.'

'You've compared me to rainbows and roses,' said Joan, 'and now let's have a go at the soup.'

The lunch he had ordered was above praise.

'Much too good,' Joan said, 'to talk while one's eating it.'

The last dish she refused. It was an *omelette surprise*, with her initials baked upon its flimsy crust.

'I had hoped you would like this,' he said despondently.

'I do — it's my favourite sweet,' she answered, waved it away, pushed back her chair, lighted a cigarette, and stuffed her hands in some very inadequate pockets. For a while she smoked in silence, then she said, 'Well, you've done me proud, haven't you?'

'I am more than repaid if you think so.'

'Proud,' Joan repeated. 'I am wondering why.'

He produced a cigar and held it to his ear. 'Miss Miller, in the army I have the reputation of being a bit of a martinet. I doubt whether any officer under my command would attribute much sentiment to me.'

'And yet?' said Joan.

'And yet I am full of sentiment. The sight of your suffering the other day touched me to the quick. I prayed, if there was any way in which, even to a small extent, I could mitigate your suffering, that I might be given the chance to do so.'

'Hence this?'

He nodded.

'Hence a bank of roses, a luncheon fit for a queen, and my initials embroidered on a bun.'

A sensation of discomfort stole over him. 'It was a clumsy attempt to — to ——'

'To help me to forget the dead?'

'Don't let us use that word,' he begged her, with deep sincerity.

'No,' said Joan, 'we won't — why should we? For Harley isn't dead — I got a letter this morning, that he wrote me from a prison camp.'

The glass of brandy lifted towards his mouth stopped midway and was returned so suddenly to the table that the stem broke. To hide his confusion, Fawlk dabbed at the spilt spirit with a napkin.

'Is this true?'

'Perfectly. It makes a happy ending to our wake, doesn't it?'

For nearly a minute, Fawlk continued dabbing with his napkin mechanically. At last: 'It does indeed,' he said. Then, 'In the letter did he explain anything?'

'If you would like to read it.'

'I should.'

He read it in silence and handed it back. 'I feel,' he said, 'I am doing rather less than justice to this — good news. My attitude may not be very clear to you. In asking you to lunch, I was inspired at first by sympathy, but I cannot blame myself if sympathy has ripened into a deeper emotion. In the circumstances you will understand why enthusiasm is tempered by a shadow of regret.'

Joan said nothing, and he motioned to the waiter to bring the bill.

'At least, I can express pleasure at your happiness and relief, even if, at the moment, my own is not so clearly defined.'

'Thank you,' said Joan, 'but it was hardly playing the game to have expected me to celebrate the death of a friend with soufflés — quite so soon.'

'I accept the reproach,' he nodded, but his face hardened as he spoke. 'A soldier is, of necessity, callous where death is concerned. He learns in a hard school to wipe out and pass on.' He rose and held back her chair. 'But there is one thing, Miss Miller, you can rely on me sponging from my memory. I intend to forget that, when the battery position came under shell fire on the morning of the counter-attack, Captain Trevelyan did not report for duty.'

A flush of scarlet covered Joan's face and neck, and her hands shut into fists. For a moment Fawlk half expected her to hit him in the mouth. But the colour faded, her hands relaxed, and she laughed.

'Perhaps you were too busy running away to know whether he did or did not.'

'Perhaps,' he replied slowly. 'In any case, Miss Miller, that is a suggestion I am not in the least likely to forget.'

'I hope not,' she said, and walked out ahead of him.

END OF BOOK I

BOOK II

I

SAID Miss Buddy, autocrat of 'Medical Comforts Section' at the Prisoners' Aid Depot, 'Will you girls get on with your work?'

Also she said, 'I don't know what's the matter with you all.'

And again, 'The next time I see anyone looking through the window, I'll have the blinds down.'

But for once in her career as overseer of lady war workers, Buddy's discipline failed to control the situation.

'At least I expected *you* to work, Joan,' said she.

To the amazement of everyone, Joan replied, 'You're going to be unlucky.'

Then Buddy rose and took the floor with six stone of dauntless and inflexible authority. The lightnings danced from her eyes.

'Then all I can say,' said she, 'all I can say is that you don't deserve the war to end.'

But no one heeded her words — no one was listening — to her. Yet all listened with their ears — their hearts — their ambitions. Heads tilted, hands raised, breath held, they listened — their sense of hearing pricked and strained to the highest pitch of sensibility. The silence was almost tangible. The whole world was trembling on the brink of an expectation too immense for imagination readily to accept.

Suddenly Paula rose with a wild, ungovernable gesture.

'I can't bear it! It's too much! I can't bear it!'

'Oh, shut up!' snapped a voice harshly.

In the hush that followed, the telephone bell swizzed.

'Yes,' said Buddy, the receiver to her ear. 'I see. Yes. I'll tell them.'

Deliberately she hung up the receiver and turned to the crowded benches and the strained, eager faces.

'Armistice,' she said. 'Off overalls.'

The last half of the sentence was overwhelmed in a roar of maroons, the clatter of feet, the crash of overturned benches, and the clarion call of a bugle in the square below.

They did not wait for more. Tearing off their overalls as they ran, a solid wedge of girls struggled in the doorway to be first out. Only Paula remained, her head buried in long white arms stretched across a table.

Buddy found herself swept along with the rest. Joan and three other girls lifted her off her feet and bore her shoulder high. From some mysterious part of her raiment, Buddy had produced a bit of bunting and was waving it.

In the main hall the 'Medical Comforts' section converged with the 'Cakes and Confectionery' section and fought for priority of exit.

The green baize table by the front door constituting an obstruction was the first thing to leave the house. With it, bruised but happy, rolled the girl who kept the nominal rolls. In her happiness she bit the ankles of those who trod upon her.

A charwoman, restrained by infirmity from taking a prominent part in the rush, threw a bucket of dirty water from an upstairs window on the heads of those below and waved a holland apron in an access of patriotic exuberance that put even the youngsters to shame.

'One in the eye for Kruger!' she yelled, mysteriously confusing the Great War with previous hostilities in South Africa, in which her 'old man' had suffered untimely extinction.

On the pavement the girls were yelling for the Commandant, who arrived under escort and minus her skirt, which, thanks to help received on the staircase, she had lost irredeemably. Enthusiasm and a pair of green knickers mantled any confusion she may have felt.

'All out!' someone shouted.

And Joan, from one of the stone piers of the front steps, 'Fall in, the Number Nines. Come along, the Laxatives! Form fours! By the left — quick marrrch!'

Seizing a bentwood chair, which had arrived in the square with the table, she hung it round her neck to act as a drum, and, with the Commandant on her left and Buddy on her right, she led the triumphal march westward.

'It's a long way to Tipperary, it's a long way to go!'

Every condition of man and woman joined in that march. The traffic was held up at Hyde Park Corner to allow the procession to pass. Saint George's Hospital contributed nurses, medicos, and even patients.

Outside Wellington House a policeman kissed the Commandant, because he was Irish and her knickers were green. Joan collared his helmet and stuck it on her head, and an Australian Tommy offered death to the policeman if he should take it away from her. So the policeman hoisted Buddy onto his shoulders, and, deserting his beat, bore her cheering down Piccadilly.

At clubs they passed, respectable old boys suddenly went mad and whooped and rushed out, kissing discriminatingly and dancing all manner of flings and things. And they laughed and cried and cheered and were younger than the youngest.

Motor-cars and buses and taxis joined in, and a coster with a barrow of tomatoes invited anyone and everyone 'to chuck ve lot abaht.' And until the ammunition was exhausted, the battle of tomatoes raged about the entrance to the In and Out Club, with severe casualties on both sides. And a cigar merchant near by went mad and delivered a barrage of aërial torpedos from Havana at half-a-crown apiece.

Everywhere bunting flickering out of windows — men and women shaking hands and thumping each other — hats flying, never to return. Laughter — sobs — ecstasy.

The procession had reached Devonshire House before Joan realised that she, too, had begun to cry. Until then she had only sung and shouted and kicked her heels, but now she had begun to cry, and couldn't stop. The spasm of her sobs reacting on the bentwood chair was nearly breaking her neck. The policeman's helmet was bearing down lower and lower upon her brow. Her face was all splashy where a tomato had hit it.

It was only relief — that was all. All — but it was awful. Until now, until this let-go, this uncheckable release, she had not realised how tightly she had held herself in for four years.

It was shameful to have courage in adversity and to be beaten by joy.

'Oh, I'm out — clean out,' she hiccoughed, and sidestepped into Berkeley Street to let the procession go by.

Home, less than a hundred yards away, was beckoning to her. Home and someone to cry on. Berkeley Street had emptied itself into the joyous stream of Piccadilly.

'I mustn't stop beating my drum,' she told herself, and stumbled northward, sniffing and beating valiantly.

'Nobody can see I'm crying because of my helmet,' she thought.

She could only see the pavement just before her feet.

She wanted to blow her nose most awfully, but could not get a hank. One had to be drumming, too. Home, like Tipperary, seemed an awful long way to go.

Presently she recognised a paving-stone and knew she had arrived.

Before the house were a pair of legs in very shabby puttees. A basket of roses stood beside them. The legs looked preoccupied. Joan sniffed and threw up her head to jerk the helmet back from her eyes.

Someone — a man — a disreputable soldier — was tying roses to the railings.

'Harley!' she screamed.

'Joan!' he yelled. Swept the helmet from her head, seized the chair, slung it across the roadway, crushed her in his arms and tasted tomato for the last time in the war.

2

'It wasn't intentional,' said Harley. 'I didn't know from Adam when the war would end. But when the rebellion started out there and the prisoners of War Camp Staffs were superseded by riveters and dockyard hands, a few of us didn't feel like stopping on.' He humped his shoulders. 'Even a prisoner has his pride. It was one thing to take orders from an officer, but another to take 'em from fellars who called you "comrade." That was a bit too hot.'

Joan nodded. 'I bet,' she said. 'Well?'

'Three of us walked out — that's all. It wasn't difficult. A few English sovereigns and that packet of bar chocolate you sent me did the trick.'

'So you walked out,' said Joan, her eyes animate with pride. It was too good to be true that he had done that rather than wait for release.

'Perhaps walked is a bit too dignified. Actually we crawled,' Harley admitted. 'We crawled along a sort of pipe, a tunnel that brought the electric cables into the camp. It was a devilish tight squeeze. We had to lie flat and pull ourselves along by the cables inch by inch. I got badly stuck twice. The manuscript of a book I'd written jammed me solid. The man behind me thought it was all up and began to scream. Small blame to him. I was never more scared in my life. One couldn't have worked oneself backwards, you see.'

'Aou!' said Joan.

'The trouble,' he went on, 'was the cable. It was slack and kept pulling towards us. If I hadn't managed to get a nail hold in a ridge on the pipe, we'd have stayed there for keeps.'

'I've got to hear it all,' said Joan, 'but I know I'm going to be sick.'

'It was more or less simple after that,' said Harley. 'Simple, but slow. The tunnel was about a hundred yards long and it took us three hours to make it. Our chocolate soldier was waiting for us outside with some peasant duds. We changed, said good-bye to each other, and melted into the night. I tumbled over the wire into Holland four days later.'

'Had you eaten anything?'

'Rather a rigorous diet of mangel-wurzels.'

'Foul things,' said Joan. 'I can't imagine what sheep want to eat them for. And after that?'

'The Dutch authorities were fairly lax. Too many fellars were doing what I'd done and they'd given up bothering. A man I knew sneaked me aboard a ship and I came ashore this morning at Wapping, bought an old uniform at a slop shop, and came straight here.'

Joan looked at him devouringly. 'Why did you risk it, Harley?'

'A whole year without you. I couldn't wait any longer.'

'I see,' said Joan.

After all, the explanation was quite satisfactory. That night they walked along Piccadilly, across Trafalgar Square, and down the Strand to the Savoy Hotel. And although it was Armistice night and all England was trying to concentrate itself into those particular thoroughfares, they saw no one — they walked alone — they never met a soul.

It is absurd to say that Harley carried Joan from Charing Cross to the Savoy to save her from the crowds. He did it because he wanted to carry her and because, naturally enough, she wanted to be carried. A man has every right to carry a woman, if she'll let him, and when she is in love with him she will let him — undoubtedly. At the Savoy he wanted to give her something really worth while and hard to get. He succeeded, but his success was hotly contested. They departed with what he had secured. A chair leg, part of a palm pedestal, and a nice-sized piece of carpet. Not another knight had done better for his lady love and very few had done as well.

A taxi was waiting in the quadrangle, and they took it. That is to say, they took part of the roof of it, for many others had taken it, too.

The taxi ran out of petrol in the Strand, but that made no difference. London pushed it, for nothing might stand still on that night of nights.

'Angel!' Joan shouted — for a shout was a whisper in that hullabaloo — 'S'pose we had missed being together for this!'

After that they hugged one another, that the world might behold how lovers could and would behave in a transport. Presently they left the taxi, because an old brigadier who thought he was *chef d'orchestre* wanted somewhere to stand and beat time. So he pushed them off while they were hugging and they fell into good company travelling westward in an open touring-car. There were only thirteen others in the car, so they had it, more or less, to themselves. At any rate, they occupied a favourable position in the upper strata. Their companions, who were waxing hoarse from continual cheering, welcomed new blood and fresh lungs.

'Don't care. Where anyone likes!' shouted the driver. 'I'll take 'em home if they live in the moon.'

So off they went to Battersea and made merry in a flat overlooking the Park. They made so merry that their Battersea host and hostess came back and joined them in the car and went to Barnes, where the same thing happened again. After Barnes they went to Hampstead and back to Saint John's Wood, but the personnel of the car, owing to a commonly shared reluctance to leave it, never diminished. They would probably have gone on seeing each other home until a new war was declared had not the springs of the car smashed, the back axle made an unexpected intrusion through the back seats, and the frame bent into a beautiful arc.

As neither Harley nor Joan had eaten anything within the memory of man, and as this mishap occurred in Baker Street, and as the clocks were trying to prove that it would soon be breakfast time, and as they had both lost their voices, they embraced everyone and started to walk home. In their absence some exuberant patriots had cleaned the blacking off the street lamps in Berkeley Square. They realised it as a desire to be wrapt in the sable embraces of the night assailed them mutually.

To make a bald statement of it, they wanted to kiss each other in the dark, because they never had and because — anyone will understand why. And since a wish is father to an act, Harley shinned up the lamp-posts and turned out all the lights.

After that they realised their wish, and it was indescribably so much more lovely than even a year of separation and imagination had suggested it would be, that the thought of parting became a physical impossibility.

So Harley hoisted Joan over the railings into Berkeley Square and scrambled after her, and on a garden seat beneath a leafless plane tree he buttoned what little there was of her into his British warm. And they went to sleep.

And Rogers, looking from the windows of the House of Miller in the early light of day, beheld them there and discreetly aroused them with a nice cup of hot tea.

3

But for the 'Baron' they would have married straightway. The Baron was at Nairobi, and cabled at enormous length bidding Joan wait until he got home. Among other excuses for this heartless conduct, he pointed out that he hadn't worn his silk hat for over four years and refused to miss the opportunity to wear it at his daughter's wedding. Moreover, he drew Joan's attention to the fact that she and Harley had spent a total of less than forty-eight hours in each other's company and that it was not enough to go to church about. Finally, he promised to return as soon as possible.

Joan conveyed the news to Harley with the gravity it merited. Harley took it very badly indeed. They comforted each other by making fantastic honeymoon plans, which included some of the most remote and inaccessible parts of the world.

Also Harley read her the manuscript of the book he had written in captivity. 'Clipped Wings,' it was called. Joan went mad about it, as also did the first publisher to whom it was offered. He, the publisher, performed the impossible and rushed out a large first edition in less than a month. After that the press and the public also went mad about it. It achieved a success comparable to 'The First Hundred Thousand,' which had so vividly epitomised the early days of the war.

'Clipped Wings' was the first book to represent the Germans as a nation of disciplined patriots rather than a horde of congenital villains. While it appealed to that section of the British public who liked a handshake after a row, it seriously offended the 'Let's go on hating' brigade. Heads were shaken over it, but laurel bushes were stripped.

Within a week of publication, Harley had become one of the most talked-of and embarrassed young men in England. Also he was demobilised.

Because neither he nor Joan was in search of publicity, no account of their engagement appeared in the papers. They had decided to get married quietly when the Baron returned, and then slip off to Lhassa in Thibet, or some such solitude, where they could devote their attentions exclusively to each other.

In the mean time they plunged into the vortex of post-war hysteria and exuberance which swept the British Isles from Land's End to John O'Groats.

Freddie Miller, who was demobilised after leaving the hospital, had refused the Baron's offer of a job in the British East, and, to the regret of his family, had recruited himself to a staff appointment with a firm of motor-dealers in Knightsbridge.

With the cessation of hostilities, the motor business had become, for an esoteric reason impossible to define, the most conspicuously martial centre of the universe. Few of its adherents were men of less than field rank. The washers in the mews at the rear of the resplendent show rooms were addressed as corporal or sergeant. In the panelled offices above, majors, colonels, and even brigadiers weighed the problem of part exchange with a thoroughness that suggested dispositions for an attack on the grand scale. Confronted by this formidable array of rank and gallantry, clients were as impotent of defence as a deserter at a court-martial.

Freddie Miller, in consideration of a deposit of one thousand pounds, was enlisted under the banner of Sherlock and Mayduke (Colonel Sherlock and Major Mayduke).

During the conflict from which the nation had emerged, there is no doubt these two officers had conducted themselves with distinction. They had learned on the field of battle to take chances and to scout dangers. This lesson they vigorously applied to the emergency of commerce and civil competition. From an ethical point of view some of their dealings were susceptible to criticism, but no one could deny that they showed ingenuity and resource in amassing coin, while their condescension and affability towards their victims was a pattern to the beholder.

A passion for 'writing things off,' omitting to pass certain deals through the books, and for keeping themselves permanently supplied with the latest and most elegant automobiles (apparently for purposes of demonstration, but actually for personal comfort and joy), may have reacted unfavourably upon the returns rendered to shareholders.

But as the one not infrequently said to the other, by way of excuse, 'Dammit, old man, we do the milking, and it's up to us to expect the cream.'

And the other would endorse that view with indignation at 'the beggars who sit on their spines and expect us to stuff their damned pockets for 'em.'

Freddie seemed to find their society amusing. But Freddie had changed noticeably since that smack on the forehead at Villers Guislan. His moral outlook had relaxed. He was moody and subject to fiery losses of temper. His return to civilian life was marked by a constant pursuit of something with a kick in it. The war had left his appetite for sensation unappeased. He plunged into mad parties, which ended in riot and bills for dilapidations exceeding the cost of the food and wine. Twice he had been arrested in raids on illicit gambling-houses, and the Magistrate at Bow Street, dealing with his fifth summons for driving to the danger of the public, warned him that next time his licence would be suspended.

'The whole country's going to pot,' he cursed, kicking his legs about. 'What the devil do they expect me to do? — knit?'

The adventurous undertakings of Sherlock and Mayduke gave life a fillip. He took Joan along to introduce her, and their hints at intimacies with ladies highly placed in spheres of musical entertainment made her rosy with rage.

'How do you like 'em?' he asked as he drove Joan home.

'I don't.'

Freddie laughed. 'They aren't exactly first-rate,' he admitted, 'but there's no fungus on 'em, old thing. They do whiz along.'

'Sharks,' said Joan. 'A couple of rotten swankers.'

'You're always calling me down these days,' Freddie complained.

'Because I don't care to see you in a double-breasted waistcoat leaning, with your legs crossed, against a stuma motor-car?'

'It fills in the time, anyhow.'

'It doesn't — it just wastes it. Why don't you take on that job the Baron offered you?'

Freddie shook his head. 'Counting coffee beans — no, thanks. When I want to go daffy, I'll put in for a vacancy at Bedlam or some other nonsense house.' Suddenly his face became troubled. 'Don't curse me, old thing. These days something's biting my leg all the time. There's a spur in my side. I've got to have crowds round me — excitement — risk. Honestly, I'd go off my rocker on a coffee plantation.'

'What have you lost, Freddie?'

He humped his shoulders.

Joan repeated her question, but he only shook his head. 'I don't know, old thing, honestly I don't know. It takes time to smooth down after a big splash. Bound to be a few ripples left over. I haven't enough cash to do anything worth while and the Baron is sick of being touched. Don't you worry. You've plenty to think about.'

But Joan could not help worrying, and Harley found her with her forehead screwed up into islands of perplexity.

'I wish you'd get hold of him. It's this cheap set he's flipping round with that's playing him up.'

4

Joan's wishes were a command, and Harley did what he could. He had taken a furnished flat in Duke Street, Saint James's, and as there was a spare room, he asked Freddie to come along and fill it. Freddie, who had been leading a vagabond life at various hotels, shook his head, but a few nights later he turned up with a suitcase after Harley was in bed.

He said he was rather tight and demanded bromo-seltzer. After that he had a couple of whiskies, prowled about the flat, hands in pockets, declaring that Harley would find him a hell of a nuisance and that he'd better clear out straight away.

'Have another spot and go to bed,' said Harley.

At that, Freddie took offence and said he'd go to bed when he damn well liked and anyone who wanted to tuck him in could go to blazes. Also he said that if Harley didn't find him a hell of a nuisance, he would certainly find Harley a hell of a nuisance.

'Look here,' said Harley, 'you can drop trying to pick up a quarrel with me. It won't come off.'

'Who's trying?' Freddie demanded. 'Quarrel? I don't know what you mean.'

After that they talked war until nearly dawn. But it was an uneasy companionship. Freddie's restlessness kept him continually on the go and where he went was no one's concern but his own. Only when a few men dropped in in the evenings for a jaw or a game of poker was he able to stay at home and make himself moderately sociable.

Because it was Joan's wish, Harley got into the way of fixing up a party about three times a week. Drinks, a lot of tobacco, and a mild gamble was the programme. It served to keep Freddie from getting too restive.

Cosmo Regan, of the Siege Park, Amesbury, the Staff Captain of Heavies, Hammersley, late of Harley's battery, and Collier, who had a job at the 'War House,' were the regular attendants. One or two of them had been demobilised upon a fictitious supposition of belonging to 'pivotal trades.' War gratuities had provided them with money to spend. As most of these men were holding or had held senior rank to Freddie, their presence helped him not to behave like a lunatic.

It might have been thought that Sherlock and Mayduke, his seniors in the motor business, would have had a similar effect, but their authority was too heavily concealed under a mantle of 'old boys' and 'dear hearts' to be of any value.

Harley's parties were a success until Sherlock and Mayduke discovered them. Once these two heroes found their way to the flat, there was no keeping them out. Their continued presence was a severe strain on Harley's patience. As host he could not openly complain, but in concert with his other guests an effort was made to bore them into stopping away. It must be confessed that the effort was a dismal failure, for, confronted, as they believed, by men of little wit or spirit, Sherlock and Mayduke, who were redoubtable talkers and indefatigable wags, took the floor in an endeavour to supply what the rest lacked.

On the subject of women they possessed a fund of anecdote and experience hard to rival. To do them justice, they were meticulously discreet and no woman was ever referred to by name. They used instead such refreshing, if mysterious, alternatives as 'Piece of goods,' 'Childie,' or 'Bint' (which is supposed to suggest familiarity with India).

'Freddie,' said Harley, one night when their guests had gone, 'I suppose there's no way of heading off those season ticket holders?'

Freddie shrugged his shoulders. 'Don't see how. It's difficult. 'Sides, they've taken a packet off me and I wouldn't mind having it back.'

'If you're short of cash ——' Harley began.

Freddie's reception of this offer was startling. 'Thanks, damn you, but I don't borrow from friends. Your impending marriage to Joan doesn't make me one of your dependents.'

A moment later, he was reproaching himself for being such a cad.

'Don't bother,' said Harley. 'I rather admire the sentiment.'

Freddie kicked his way across the room and stared gloomily out of the window. 'I'm on my own and everyone else's nerves these days.'

Harley said nothing, and presently Freddie drifted back to a chair. 'Talking of nerves,' he said, 'I gave a trial run to a friend of yours to-day — Paula Drayton. Oh, golly!'

Harley looked up. 'I didn't know she was in London. I called and they told me she was abroad — in France.'

Freddie nodded. ‘Got back a fortnight ago. She’s been staying in a farmhouse near where her brother was killed. Got hold of his batman, it seems, who showed her the exact spot. A crossroads.’

‘H’m!’ said Harley, and somehow felt nervous.

‘She’s a queer devil. Told me she used to go there night after night and talk to him. Found a splinter, and is convinced it’s a bit of the shell that killed him. She’s carrying it round with her even now.’

‘Why — what for?’

‘She said she was psychic and that it told her things — or would. My opinion is she’s some idea of revenge.’

Harley repeated the word ‘revenge’ and shook his head. ‘I’ll go and see her.’

‘I wouldn’t — I’d stop away.’

‘I’ll go and see her,’ Harley repeated.

5

He went, and was shown into the drawing-room of the little house in Clarges Street. Like its owner, the room was arresting. Orange and black with tenuous furniture of malachite green. Upon a Récamier couch before the fire lay Paula, in a black wrap that accentuated the length and thinness of her body. Except for one crossed foot that rotated ceaselessly, she was motionless as a bronze. Her long white fingers were fastened upon a shell splinter.

Over two years had gone by since last they met, but she did not look up when Harley came into the room. She spoke his name in a voice that sounded huskier than ever, and tapped the end of the couch with her restless foot for him to sit there.

‘How are you, Paula?’ he said, conscious at once of the old embarrassment.

'Alive,' she answered. 'Alive — worse luck.'

'Miller tells me you've been abroad.'

It was not a happy inspiration.

'I went to look for David. They told me where he was buried, but a graveyard never meant anything to me. Do you know what's there to stand for him? Two penn'orth of cheap wood shaped like a cross and his name stamped by one of those penny-in-the-slot machines you find on a pier. David used to be fond of those machines. Always was stamping his name to go on a play box or his lockers at school.' She reached out for a cigarette and lit it. 'I found the place he was killed later. This' — she held out the shell splinter — 'this is what killed him.'

'My dear,' he said, 'how can you be sure, and what would be the good if you were?'

'It tells me things,' she answered. 'If I were to meet the man who fired this shell, I should know. It tells me things.'

'Nothing of use, Paula.'

'Who can judge? David's death wasn't so simple as it seemed.'

With an effort Harley prevented an exclamation. It was impossible she could know the real facts and nothing in the world was to be gained by telling her.

Choosing his words, he said, 'He was on his way to the O. Pip when the shell struck him.'

'And before that? I want to know everything.'

'There is nothing more to say than what I wrote in my letter.'

'I see,' she said slowly. 'I see. Yet, at the crossroads, where he tried to talk to me, there was more than that, Harley.' She waited, and as he said nothing, shrugged her shoulders. 'You won't tell me — but one day I shall know.'

Harley put out a hand and took one of hers. 'Paula, you'll go to pieces if you let your imagination run this way.'

'Perhaps,' she nodded. 'What's it matter if I do?'

'Go about more,' he advised. 'You want taking out from yourself. Brooding here is like death.'

'I am going about more. Quite reckless I'm being. Last night I danced until dawn. Rector's, Murray's, and a heap of other places less respectable. A wild night, and I was kissed in a taxi on the way home.'

To Harley it seemed that he was listening to someone else. 'Better than this morbid brooding,' he said.

'Is it? I wonder. You'd think the kisses of a man who disgusted her would take a woman out of herself. But they don't.'

She humped her shoulders. 'It's a wonder you find time for poker parties three times a week. Making the most of a declining bachelorhood?'

He was getting angry. 'If you like,' he said.

'I wonder she allows it — not a very attractive company either. Mayduke — Sherlock! Hardly your kind, Harley.'

'You know them? Of course, you are buying a car.'

'It goes deeper than that. The gallant colonel was my dancing partner of last night and my kissing partner. You know how he got his colonelcy — let himself be divorced so that the Brigadier could marry his wife.'

Harley was not surprised and said so. Also he looked at his watch.

She saw the covert action as he twitched his sleeve back from his wrist, and straightened her legs to leave him no room on the couch.

'Why not ring up the exchange and make sure your watch isn't slow?' she suggested. 'I'd hate to think I was keeping you longer than courtesy demands.'

Harley moved to the fireplace and stood with his hands on the mantelshelf. 'You make friendship impossible, Paula.'

He was conscious in saying so that he had chosen a bad line of retreat. The words invited argument — explanation — reproach. It was unlikely she would let him escape on a phrase like that. He waited with his back towards her, staring sullenly into the fire.

At last, 'Yes, friendship is impossible,' she said, and was shaken from head to toe by great dry sobs.

'Paula, Paula,' he began. 'I'm terribly, terribly sorry ——'

She sprang to her feet and faced him. 'I don't want your sorrow or your friendship.'

Her arms fastened round his neck and she clung to him.

'Love me — if only a little — no one need know. Harley, Harley, can't you be merciful and love me — a little? Life is so terribly empty.'

'I can't,' he said, unfastened her arms, and left the house — hating himself.

6

'I feel rather arrogant — rather boastful,' said Joan, as, with her hand comfortingly bestowed in Harley's, the taxi bore them down Piccadilly towards Belgrave Square.

'I've never felt anything else since that morning at Victoria Station two years ago,' he replied.

'Two years — isn't it awful, Harley, the time we've wasted? No, don't do that. Aunt Maud hates people to turn up at her parties kissed and dishevelled.'

'We might go somewhere where they aren't so particular,' he suggested.

Joan shook her head. 'No, we must turn up. This is a joint do. Miss Beechcroft and Lady Duff Allen versus about five hundred guests. And a tall popular announcer at the head of the staircase.'

'Pity we can't use him to proclaim that a marriage has been arranged and will take place in about a quarter of a minute between Harley Trevelyan and Joan Miller.'

'That's what I meant when I said I felt boastful. Of course, one's particular friends know, but I'm beginning to want to be vulgar and splashy about our marriage, and to-night would be a chance.'

'Why to-night in particular, Joan?'

'Well, Lady Duff was Commandant of the Prisoners' Aid Depot where I used to work, and there'll be thousands of girls there who worked with me. There'll be Aunt Maud's canteen crowd, too. Of course, the idea is to talk about how splendidly we all behaved during the war, so it wouldn't be a bad idea to put up a counter-attack.'

'M'yes,' Harley agreed. 'I don't know that I much fancy standing under a branch of orange blossom while your rejected suitors sling champagne bottles at my head.'

Joan laughed. 'I should have thought you'd have loved it, angel. I'm not a beast, but I couldn't bear to marry you unless I felt that at least someone was black with envy. How's Paula, Harley? You went and saw her, didn't you?'

He nodded. 'David's death knocked her all to pieces.'

They were silent for a moment. 'She's sure to be here to-night.'

Harley moved uneasily. 'Oh, Lord!' he said.

'Why?'

'She scares me, Joan. It's an idiotic confession, but she does.'

Joan shook her head. 'Men are such cowards about hurting people. They can't be candid. When I'm made love to and don't want to be, I'm very downright and say so. It's damned unfair to be kind. You should have seen me deal with your late O.C.'

'Fawlk! You never told me,' said Harley, tightening up.

'Didn't I? Perhaps we had something better to talk about.'

Harley relaxed. 'Wonder what's become of him.'

'Oh, he's still on the map. He writes to me sometimes.'

'Does he, by George?'

'Oh, yes. He isn't a man to give up.'

Harley was silent a moment — thinking. 'Did he ever try to make love to you, Joan?'

'He purred in the neighborhood. He is rather like a cat, don't you think? One of those hunting cats who lie along a bough waiting to drop on anything that passes below. It rather surprised me that I outed him in the first round.'

'Yes,' said Harley slowly, and nodded. 'The kind of cat that lies along a bough. Yes, yes.'

The taxi stopped before a striped awning and a roll of red carpet spanning the pavement and the wide steps of the house. With the end of the war, green baize tables and benches had been evacuated and the warehoused furniture restored to its old abiding-places.

The cloak-rooms were crowded with arrivals, and Harley, waiting at the foot of the staircase for Joan, exchanged greetings with numerous friends and acquaintances. After five years of a nation in khaki, it was strange to see so many men in civilian clothes. Only their talk was still in uniform.

'He got his at Passchendaele — thought you knew.'

'The Brigadier was my own fag at Rugby. Giving me the very hell of a dressing-down he was, too — didn't recognise me until I said, "Drop it, Chicken." My dear fellar, his face was a picture, but he took it like a good 'un and we stopped a couple of stiff Christophers before parting.'

'Old Chicken, good lord!'

'Got pipped the very next day, poor beggar, and Duffy picked up a D.S.O. bringing him in.'

'Haven't you married or something since I saw you?'

'Nearly; but there was a hell of a bust-up about the "or something," and my fiancée went out in the smoke.'

'Remember that girl with the tomato barrow at Doullens?'

'Yvonne? Rather; and the old bird with the crinoline skirt who sold "Daily Mails" and used to stand over an oil stove to keep herself warm.'

A second group composed of pale but resolute females talked otherwise and more earnestly. There was much that still rankled in their minds — many things that, owing to the shortness of the war, they had been unable to put right. The days of organisation and organisations were over, and their passing had left a void that ached bitterly.

Joan appeared, and together they ascended the stairs. On a landing, Joan paused to tweak the ear of a tiny woman and to say, 'Hullo, Buddy.'

'That will do from you, Miller,' said Buddy.

The 'tall popular announcer' intoned their names with gravity and emphasis.

Harley shook hands with Lady Duff Allen and cushioned off Aunt Maud Beechcroft into the crowded reception-room beyond. Within half a minute he had lost Joan, and moved disconsolately into a corner to escape the press.

An air of restraint and attention to duty brooded over the guests. They gave the impression of being there contrary to any desires of their own and in response to the dictates of a high and remorseless authority. Harley had a curious feeling that he was back in the prisoners' camp. Freedom and spontaneity had been left on the doorstep. The restraining influences of a residue of discipline, from which peace had not yet thoroughly purged the world, checked any disposition towards gaiety and ease.

'A wary and unnatural party,' thought Harley, took out his cigarette-case, and returned it to his pocket guiltily.

Someone touched his shoulder and, turning, he found Paula beside him. She appeared to be in a state of nervous animation.

'Walk round with me,' she demanded. 'There's a man here I want you to point out.'

'A man,' he repeated, moving away beside her.

'Fawlk. Major Fawlk.'

Harley stopped. 'But — what makes you think —'

'I heard him announced half an hour ago, but was too far off for a glimpse of him.'

'He may have gone,' said Harley hopefully. 'He's not a fellow I'm anxious to meet again.'

'Why not?'

Harley shrugged his shoulders non-committally, and said, 'The war's over.'

'He was David's O.C.,' said Paula. 'After David died, he wrote me — a letter.'

Harley started. 'Oh.'

Paula peered at him closely.

'Fawlk never struck me as a man likely to have done such a thoughtful thing. I was surprised.'

Paula accepted the explanation with a shake of the head. 'You would rather not introduce me, then?'

It was difficult without telling her the truth to answer that. After all, there could be no danger in making the introduction if the chance presented itself. Fawlk would be the last man to repeat what had happened. His letter proved that.

'If I see him, of course I'll introduce you,' he said.

'Bravura!' said Paula. 'Come on, then, and find him.'

7

Paula may have suspected that Harley had no intention of making good his promise, for as they moved from room to room her eyes never left his face for an instant.

Evan Fawlk was in the buffet regarding a portrait by Peter Lely when Harley first saw him. He turned as they came in, and their recognition was mutual.

'Trevelyan,' he said softly. 'Well, now! You appear to have flourished in captivity; but I beg your pardon, you are not alone.'

Harley acknowledged the greeting with a curt nod and spoke to Paula. 'This is Major Fawlk. Miss Drayton. You remember her brother was in the battery.'

Beyond a scarcely perceptible twitch at the corners of his mouth, Fawlk gave no sign of surprise.

'Of course I remember,' he said, with a bow. 'Although he was only a boy, your brother was one of my best officers.'

Paula turned to Harley. 'Thanks for your escort,' she said. 'I'd like to talk to Major Fawlk if I may.'

It is doubtful whether Harley would have accepted dismissal so readily had not Aunt Maud Beechcroft descended upon him in full sail and borne him off to meet 'such interesting people.'

'There is a vacant seat in that alcove, Miss Drayton. Shall we occupy it?' Fawlk suggested, and gallantly offered his arm. Then, when they were seated, 'If there is anything I can tell you about your brother, please command me.'

'Tell me how he died,' she answered in a low voice.

'But you know. A shell ——'

'Not that. There's something else besides that, I know it in myself — here,' and she touched her heart.

Evan Fawlk looked at her inquiringly. 'I hardly understand,' he answered, 'what else? Surely, if there had been anything else, Captain Trevelyan would have told you?'

'No,' said Paula, and shook her head, 'he won't.'

The 'tall popular announcer' begged the company for 'Silence, pray, for Lady Duff Allen, your hostess.'

Mounting a little dais, Lady Duff Allen delivered herself of a short address relative to the work done by her department during the war and her own contribution in particular.

'I am sure many present here to-night have looked on me as a very terrible person, but you see I am not really such an ogre as I seemed.'

Laughter and applause.

'Will he not?' said Fawlk. 'I suppose that is scarcely surprising — and yet ——' He paused.

'What?' from Paula.

'For a while I thought Trevelyan was something more than a friend to you.'

Paula coloured angrily. 'Why do you say that?'

'Your brother and I had some talks together. Youth is not always discreet.'

'Not only youth,' she retorted.

He accepted the reproof with a smile. It had told him what he wanted to know. The woman was jealous. The sight of Harley in the flesh had fanned his sleeping hatred and indignation into an eager flame. In Paula Drayton there might be found an instrument wherewith to square the debt between them. But it would call for tact, and ingenuity. Clearly she was a difficult woman. His eyes settled on her hands with the fingers restlessly plucking at the embroidery of her gown.

Lady Duff Allen's short address was rapidly developing into a history of the war. Through a rift in the crowd Fawlk caught a glimpse of Joan with a bored pout upon her lovely little mouth. Her mouth was like ripe fruit in a desert. A consuming eagerness to bruise it with kisses set the pulses of his throat throbbing passionately. Ever since their first meeting she had affected him that way. Something within him surged for her. He shut his eyes and in imagination saw Harley Trevelyan kissing her — kissing her.

Lady Duff Allen's voice assumed a new and joyous inflection like unto a peal of wedding bells. 'And now I have something to say which I know will interest all the girls who used to work here with me. Joan Miller has asked me to say that soon — very soon — she is going to marry Captain Harley Trevelyan, whose clever book — there! if I haven't forgotten what it's called — we all know so well. Now let's give them both real "Prisoners' Aid" honours. Hip, hip ——'

Feminine cheering is not as a rule an inspiring sound, but the present example proved an exception. Released from a temporary obligation to be on their best behaviour, the girls put down a barrage which would have done credit to a boys' school. Nor were musical honours lacking, in the middle of which Joan was hoisted onto the shoulders of two stalwart damsels and yelled at to respond.

Which she did with characteristic brevity and point. 'There he is, hiding in that corner, and anyone who wants to kiss him may.'

In the rush that followed, Paula rose to her feet.

'They did it on purpose — on purpose!' she cried, and with a strangled sob made for the door.

Fawlk was waiting for her on the pavement beside the open door of a taxi. His features twitched, and his colour was ghastly. 'If you'll allow me to drive you home ——' he began.

Paula shook her head. Taking her by the wrist, he leaned forward and whispered, 'I want to tell you the truth about your brother's death.'

Paula nodded, breathed an address, and preceded him into the taxi.

He spoke only once on the way to Clarges Street. 'You were in love with Trevelyan? I am going to prove, I hope, that you are well rid of him.'

The rest of the journey he sat in silence thinking it out — thinking it out.

8

Paula left only one light burning in that orange-and-black drawing-room of her little house in Clarges Street — a tiny lamp with a green vellum shade across which a serpent writhed. It shed a ghostly light on Evan Fawlk as he sat before the fire, talking in a low, tuneless monotone.

Paula, fingering the shell fragment, was stretched on the couch, silent and scarcely breathing, her eyes fixed upon his face.

'Before I tell you anything,' he said, 'I want you to understand the kind of man I am. After that, if you would rather not hear my statement, you have only to say so. Love — as I can see at a glance — is the strongest force in your nature. In mine hate is the strongest force. I do not defend myself. I, too, am capable of love, but my capacity for hatred is stronger. I love Joan Miller. She is the only woman I ever have loved. There is nothing lofty or spiritual in my love for her. I have no ambition to serve or protect her. Her happiness has no concern with me whatever. I love her, you understand — selfishly — possessively — carnally. Fate, however, would seem to have decreed that these emotions are not to be gratified. She loves Trevelyan, and therefore I hate Trevelyan. I am quite unreasoning in that hatred. If he were the noblest man in the world, which, God knows, he is not, I should hate him just as violently. If our civilisation were not what it is, I should probably lie up one dark night and put a knife in his back. That may surprise you, for physically there is not much to choose between us and I might equally well succeed in a fair fight. But hatred does not fight fair. If I have told you enough of myself to prove that nothing I may say about Trevelyan is worth your while to believe, you have only to dismiss me and I will go without another word.'

He finished his drink, rose, and put the glass on the mantelshelf with an air of finality.

Paula waved him back in his chair. 'Go on. I want to believe you,' she said.

He shook his head. 'Be careful how you let your idols be shattered,' he warned. 'For that will be my task.'

'Go on,' she repeated.

'So be it. Then, in the first place, Trevelyan is a coward — a mean, shameless coward — who crouches for protection behind anyone who has the courage to shelter him.'

Paula moved uneasily. 'Did they give him a D.S.O. for that?'

'Ah, it is no use,' said Fawlk. 'I might have known you could never learn to hate. Women do not understand how many medals come up with the rations. Where love is truth cannot enter.'

'I want the truth, but why need you talk like this about Harley? I asked how David died. Even if Harley were a coward, that could have no bearing on David's death.'

'You are wrong, Miss Drayton. But for his cowardice your brother might well be alive to-day. It would have been a lover, not a brother you lost.'

'What are you saying?' she whispered huskily.

'It was on the eve of the surprise attack before Cambrai. Trevelyan and your brother had spent the day in the forward observation post. There had been heavy shelling and a number of casualties. When Trevelyan reported to me in the late afternoon, he was in a state bordering on panic. A few days previously a warrant had been issued to the battery for the use of the officer who had been longest without leave. It went to your brother, who, by a few hours, had been longer than Trevelyan. At, in effect, the eleventh hour, Trevelyan came to me and claimed the warrant. He argued, truly enough, that he had done years more service than the boy and was entitled to it. I replied that the orders were precise and that I had neither the will nor the power to reverse them. It was then he told me that he wished to go home for the purpose of marrying Joan Miller. You will understand that this excuse was scarcely likely to recommend itself to me, but I ask you to believe, where my military duties were involved, I was not influenced by personal consideration. The upshot was that I told him to talk it over with Drayton. If Drayton was prepared to forgo his leave, then I would not oppose it.'

'Harley refused, of course.'

'On the contrary. He accepted my proposal with alacrity.'

Paula dropped her head. 'How horrible!' she said.

'I am afraid there was not much unselfishness in France in the matter of leave warrants. Men valued them far above rubies. With the object Trevelyan had in view, I, least of all men, do not blame him.'

'Let me hear the rest,' said Paula. 'It can hardly be worse.'

'I sent an orderly for your brother, but before he had time to dress and report to me, news came that the officer on duty at the O. Pip had been shot through the brain. In the circumstances I ordered Trevelyan to return there straightway.'

'Yes — well?'

'I shall not readily forget what followed. Trevelyan and I were alone or a court-martial would have been inevitable. He accused me of trying to get him killed. He knew we were both in love with the same girl and said it was the story of Uriah over again. He declared he was ill and had been shell-shocked during the day. He claimed that it was a junior officer's job to attend the O. Pip. It was one of the most shameful displays of wind up I had ever witnessed. In the middle of it your brother reported. Although Drayton was only a youngster, he had a fine sense of discipline. It was evident that he was greatly shocked at Trevelyan's conduct. Very courageously he addressed me. "Look here, sir, Trevelyan has had a bit of shaking up. Let me go instead of him." It was not my practice to accept suggestions from juniors, but, before I had time to reply, Trevelyan cut in with the words, "If you refuse, it will prove that my accusations were true." This observation, and the tone in which it was spoken, was so subversive of discipline as to rob me for the moment of speech and, before I had time to refuse, your brother picked up his tin hat and ran out. I shouted to an orderly to follow and bring him back, but the orderly was too late. He picked up your brother dead at the crossroads.'

For a long while Paula did not speak. She sat opening and shutting her hands. Suddenly she sprang to her feet and, throwing out her arms, sent everything from the mantelpiece crashing into the grate.

'The coward — coward — the murderer!' she cried. 'And it's true — it's true! He tried to tell me there at the crossroads, and ever since he's been trying — trying. Murderer — the murderer!'

Fawlk had risen and taken her wrists. 'Have I taught you how to hate?' he asked.

Gasping for breath she nodded — nodded. 'They shall know — the whole world shall know.'

He shook his head and forced her gently back to the couch. 'Useless,' he said. 'There were no witnesses. It will be his word against mine, and she, for one, will still believe in him. We must be more subtle than that.'

'I'd like to see him dead,' she moaned.

'And yet,' he answered, 'death always seems to me the least of punishments. Has death frightened you since you lost all you held dearest in the world?'

'I've prayed for it.'

'Just so,' he nodded. 'Then, my dear, let us use our wits to give him cause to pray for it — as you have. With a little thought it should not be beyond our powers.' He took a visiting-card from his pocket and dropped it on the table. 'I'll leave you now to think it over. Good-night.'

He went silently from the room and she heard the front door close behind him.

9

Paula Drayton did not sleep that night. Racked and tormented, she moved from room to room with the rhythmic repetition of a wolf in a cage. Her body and mind had become vulpine, and as she prowled she talked snarlingly to herself. Every now and again she splashed brandy into a glass and drank it raw. But spirits could not dull or quench the fire that burnt her soul with a desire for vengeance.

Somewhere in the house was David's revolver, returned after his death, with a pair of binoculars, some field boots, and the Sam Browne belt with the torn cross-strap where the fragment of shell had struck him. Her heritage — all that was left of him.

In David's room she found a few cartridges. It was strange how the feel of the loaded revolver soothed her wrangling nerves. She was able now to sit down with the revolver in an open bag lying in her lap.

The sun was shining when, a little after ten o'clock. Paula walked down Piccadilly towards Duke Street, Saint James's. The heavy revolver in the bag she carried seemed wonderfully light — as light as her footsteps. A foolish fancy filled her mind that if she tossed it into the air it would rise like a balloon and drift harmlessly away — a tiny black speck over the housetops of London.

At the top of Duke Street, she stopped uncertainly. A policeman was on duty there, standing idle by Fortnum's corner. She wondered if, perhaps, this same policeman would be startled by a shot and come running — running. For her. That taxi with the nodding driver might very well be summoned to take her away. A man was repairing the iron grates of a shop opposite. He kept shutting them with a noisy clang. Bars. Iron bars. Paula shivered.

'Very presently ——' she thought.

A revulsion of feeling swept over her.

On the opposite pavement she stopped to recover her breath and quell the urgent hammering of her pulses. The street door was open and through it came Freddie Miller, pausing, on the kerb, to look for a taxi. He did not see Paula, and she raised the fur cuff of her coat to hide her face. A Semitic-looking man, who had been loafing by the railings near by, moved forward, touched Freddie's shoulder, and spoke a few soft words in his ear. Freddie flushed angrily and brushed away the man's hand.

'What the hell d'you mean, dunning me in the open street?'

The reply, sibilant but threatening, was plainly audible. 'Either you give us satisfaction within four days or we shall know what to do, Mr. Miller.'

'Take this to go on with,' said Freddie, and, seizing the brim of the man's bowler hat, which was a shade too easy a fit to accord with the fashion, he pulled it over the man's eyes and ears and jumped into a cruising taxi.

There was no porter on duty and Paula entered the hall unnoticed. A board on the wall informed her that Harley's flat was on the second floor. She did not ring for the lift, which was somewhere above, but mounted the carpeted stairs without meeting anyone. Harley's visiting-card was tucked into the panel of a door. With desperate courage Paula touched the knob of the electric bell and waited. There was no answer, and she rang again. Still no answer. She tried the handle. The door opened, and on tiptoe she crossed a little hall and entered the living-room. It was empty. Remnants of a breakfast for two occupied a table in the window bay.

Paula moved to another door and pushed it open. Harley's room, for Joan's photograph was everywhere. A trampled towel lay on the floor of the bathroom beyond. Paula went back to the living-room and sat down jerkily in a chair at the writing-table. She had come too late.

A note with a cheque attached attracted Paula's attention. The cheque was for thirty pounds and was made out in Harley's favour. The note reproached him with being a 'wizard with the cards, old boy.' It was signed, 'Yours very penuriously, Frank Sherlock.' In a postscript he promised to take his revenge on Thursday. The gallant Colonel had been losing. He had complained to her in the taxi that night of Trevelyan's 'astonishin' luck,' 'squeezes the juice out of everyone, he does.'

The stupid, vulgar letter seemed to hold Paula's attention more than its substance would seem to have warranted. For ten minutes she sat staring at it and thinking. At last she rose mechanically and wandered round the room. In one corner was a card table. In a drawer of the table were four new packs of cards with unbroken tartan wrappers, circled with paper bands on which were printed the name of a stationer's shop in Jermyn Street.

Paula closed the drawer and tiptoed into the hall. Since she had touched that letter of Sherlock's, a curious stealthiness had invaded her movements. Desperation had given way to cunning. With the front door open to the width of a crack, she waited for the sound of the lift rising to a floor above. An eternity seemed to pass before its whining ascent told her that the coast was clear.

Shutting the door noiselessly, she ran down the stairs and so to the pavement. A taxi swallowed her up opposite Saint James's Theatre. She gave the driver the address of a hotel in Victoria where Fawlk was staying. She was shown up and invited to wait in a private sitting-room, encumbered with tin-lined boxes in the process of being packed. From not far away came the merry splash of water in a bath. A voice called out, promising to be less than five minutes. Presently Fawlk appeared, wearing and apologising for a Chinese silk dressing-gown.

He rang for a bottle of champagne.

His face was ghastly when she spoke of her visit to Harley's flat. 'Madness — madness,' he said, picked up her bag and, taking out the revolver, broke it at the breech and scattered the cartridges on the table. 'Sheer madness. You say no one saw you?'

Paula nodded.

'What an escape! But I don't understand why your mood changed. You went to shoot him and yet abandoned the idea. Why? Women do not abandon anything without an alternative. Did you find an alternative while you waited in his room?'

Paula stared at him, biting a finger-nail. At last she said, 'What is the effect on a man who is found to be cheating at cards?'

Fawlk looked at her uncomprehendingly. 'He is compelled to resign his clubs and is generally cut by everyone, but there is no reason to suppose Trevelyan ever cheated at cards.'

'No,' said Paula, 'but it might be possible to make it look as if he had.'

Moving his chair nearer to hers, he took her hands in his. 'Come, tell me exactly what you are thinking.'

'Of Joan,' she answered. 'Of Joan. She wouldn't have much use for such a man. For myself I don't know — if I loved — I don't know — but she —— There's a kind of schoolboy honesty about her. You don't work for two years with a girl without finding out the stuff she's made of. She would always play the game — however much it hurt. David was like that, too. No. She wouldn't forgive.'

'Come on,' he repeated persuasively.

'There were four new packs of cards in his rooms,' she answered dully. 'Isn't there anything sharpers do to cards? There must be.'

He nodded. 'They could be marked — one could find out the way. But one would have to get hold of these cards — and return them.'

'I know the shop where they were bought. One could buy others. He has a party on Thursday night. I might be able to change them without being seen.'

Evan Fawlk thought it over slowly and shook his head. 'It would be a hundred to one against anyone noticing that the cards were marked.'

'Not quite. I know a man — one of the players. I could drop him a hint.'

'Yes — yes. I hadn't thought of that.' He rose, filled his glass with wine, and held it up to her. 'Until to-day I have always believed in doing everything myself. You have converted me to a belief in a woman's instinct and ingenuity.'

10

They met later in the day at Paula's house in Clarges Street. Four new packs of cards in tartan wrappers lay on a small table beside Paula's couch.

Evan Fawlk was in excellent spirits when he arrived. From his jacket pocket he produced a small book and dropped it in her lap. Its title was 'Confessions of a Card Sharper,' and, although the book was written in the profoundly humble spirit of a man who had at long last witnessed the error of his ways, it ventilated, for the guidance of future generations, a variety of methods for enriching oneself at the card table at the expense of unsuspecting opponents.

'I nearly committed the folly of asking the advice of an acquaintance who is a member of the Magic Circle,' Fawlk admitted. 'But in an affair of this kind we cannot be too careful.' He smiled, and added: 'Nothing can be more discreet than a box of old books in the Charing Cross Road. You will find I have pencilled a paragraph on page ninety-six. There are also some plates. It is all very informing.'

While Paula read, he fingered the packs of cards lovingly. Paula digested the paragraph slowly, and nodded.

'A hot iron,' he said, 'should melt the sealing wax on these wrappers so as to enable us to open them without tearing the paper. Shall we try?'

Paula nodded towards the bell, but before ringing it he discreetly covered the cards with a silk handkerchief. A maid answered the bell and went to fetch an electric iron which coupled up with a wall plug. It was Fawlk who attended to this part of the business, exhibiting exquisite care to avoid scorching the wrappers while melting the wax.

'Now,' he said, laying the open packs before her, 'I am sure a needle would be more at home in your nimble fingers than in mine.'

While Paula Drayton pricked the backs of the court cards in the manner prescribed by the diagram, her fingers itched to fling every pack into the grate. The inspiration had been hers, but it was Fawlk who alone found any satisfaction in it. To Paula, sitting there pricking away a man's reputation, while Fawlk, with his hunched shoulders and grinning, cavernous face, watched over her like a cat, the whole business had become specious and contemptible. But somehow she carried out the task, pushed back the table, and moved to the window.

It was dark now, and Fawlk's reflection showed in the window glass, bending over the table, folding the packs with the precision of a chemist, warming the wax so that it adhered again, and replacing the paper bands with the dealer's name upon them.

'There,' he kept saying. 'There!' Moving his tongue from between his teeth, and breathing in heavy relief as each little package was completed to his satisfaction. 'There! And I defy anyone to guess they have been tampered with. Only one more to do.' A pause — the exhausted breath, 'There!'

'If you say that again,' said Paula, 'I shall scream.'

Evan Fawlk stroked his chin caressingly. In his preoccupation he had, perhaps, made the mistake of treating her too much like a man. He had made no allowance for feminine nerves, emotion, excitement.

'Poor little lady,' he murmured, and moved to her side, 'and you are being so brave too — so courageous.'

With a gesture of almost paternal tenderness, he put a circling arm about her shoulders.

Like a startled animal, Paula sprang away and hit him across the mouth with the back of her hand. 'Get away — you! If you touch me — I'll kill you.'

Their surprise was mutual — his at his own misjudgment of her mood, hers at the reawakening of rebellious surface senses which, but a few days before, had been dull even to the grab-and-kiss assault of a man in a taxi-cab.

'How dare you — dare you?' She stood away, panting.

It speaks highly for his self-control that he managed to force a mechanical smile, and even murmured an apologetic explanation. His nature could not readily forgive a blow. The last person to strike him in the face had been her brother. Later on, perhaps, when Harley was down and out, and Joan free, he might tell her so. There was a certain piquancy in the idea. David Drayton had got away with it, unscratched. Death had spread its shield between them. Later on —

well — one would see. But not yet. There was still too much for her to do.

'You must forgive a clumsy fool,' he said, 'even though sympathy hardly merits such rough handling.'

'I'm sorry,' she said, but there was no regret in her voice. 'I'd like to be alone. I'm not fit to be with anyone. Please go.'

'At once,' he said. 'And somehow you will contrive to exchange those cards?'

'Yes — yes — yes.'

He left his telephone number scribbled on the corner of her blotter and went .

II

That night Paula wrote to Harley:

I must see you, if only for five minutes. I shall be here at 10.30 to-morrow morning. Please, Harley.

PAULA

P.S. Don't ring up.'

She posted it herself.

At ten-fifteen next morning, she was in a taxi on the opposite side of Duke Street when Harley came from the flats. She gave him three minutes' start, jumped out of the taxi, and went in. A lift-boy was polishing the copper newel of the banister rail.

'Lift, miss?' he asked.

Paula shook her head. 'No, I'll walk up.'

'No trouble, miss,' said the boy admiringly. 'Pleasure.'

'I'd rather.' She passed him and ran lightly upstairs.

Yes, the door opened.

Paula did not hesitate. Freddie Miller, any of the servants might have been there, but she took a chance. The flat was empty. Half a minute later, she was descending the stairs. The exchange had been made. Four packs of cards were in her bag, but not the ones she had brought.

'Was they out, miss?' the boy inquired.

'No — I don't know. I only wanted to leave a letter.'

The boy's eyes followed her across the street. He was a 'movie' fan. He liked them tall and dark and southern and slinky.

'Coo! What a lovely woman,' he said.

Paula dismissed her taxi at Knightsbridge and drifted into the palatial showrooms of Sherlock and Mayduke.

The Colonel, she was informed by an ex-sergeant major, was conferring with the Major in the board room.

'Not but what,' he ventured to add, 'bein' as 'ow it's you, miss, he might be prepared to 'old over fer a bit.'

Inquiry by telephone proved the accuracy of his surmise. Paula was invited to ascend immediately. This she did by means of a mahogany staircase and under the ægis of two second lieutenants.

'Miss Drayton, sir,' said one of the twain, and held open the door to allow her to pass.

The conference upon which Sherlock and Mayduke were so earnestly engaged was the discussion of two dozen oysters and a quart of 'Black Velvet' (subsequently entered against the entertainment account). They greeted Paula with cries of welcome which included 'Yoicks' and 'View, hulloa.'

'You've chipped in, old dear, on the very crack o' time,' Mayduke declared, then pointing at the dish of oysters with a slice of folded brown bread and butter.

'What do you say? A tinkle to Wilton's and the thing's done.'

Paula shook her head. 'Nothing to eat,' she said, and, turning to Sherlock, 'I wondered, if you'd nothing to do to-night, whether you'd take me to Murray's?'

'And what better?' replied the gallant Colonel. 'What better? Only' — and here his face assumed an expression of barren despair, and he tugged at his cavalry moustache — 'only' his finger flapped open an engagement diary and ran down a list of dates — 'only, it's down here in black and white that your most admiring servant can't do it.'

'Oh, very well,' said Paula coldly; 'if you can't, it doesn't matter.'

At this not unnatural display of feminine pique and disappointment, Mayduke came loyally to the rescue of his ally.

'The Colonel 'ud cut the engagement like a shot, old thing,' he declared, 'if it wasn't for lettin' the party down. Yer see, it's a poker party, and if we didn't turn up, it 'ud wreck the show. *Wreck it*,' he added in a voice so loud and pregnant with drama as to suggest that, compared with such a calamity, the loss of the Lusitania was a mere bagatelle.

'I see,' said Paula. 'I couldn't hope to compete with that. Where is this party?'

'At dear old Trevelyan's little grey home in Duke Street.'

Paula looked surprised — startled. 'Oh,' she said. 'Oh!'

'Why the amazement, Childie? You know him, don't you?'

'I used to know him — rather well,' she answered slowly.

'A grand chap,' volunteered Mayduke. 'A thorough white man and a *Sahib*.'

Sahib, being his favourite word, was given peculiar emphasis.

'You think so. I see. Well,' and with an air of finality Paula gathered up her gloves and bag.

'Don't run away,' said Sherlock, scenting scandal. 'What's the mystery about Trevelyan?'

'There's no mystery. If you can afford to play poker there, why not?'

'I can afford to try and get some of my losses back,' said Mayduke ruefully.

Paula started and stared at him. 'Oh! So you have lost? Badly?'

'Quite enough.'

'Well, then ——' she began, stopped, and shook her head, 'No, better not.'

'Now, then, out with it.'

'I was only going to say, you might find it cheaper to cut your losses.'

'What are you driving at?' said the Colonel reproachfully, for, to do him justice, he was shocked. 'After all — one ought to be careful. Doesn't do — makin' innuendoes of that kind.'

'I agree,' said Paula. 'One ought to be careful. If I were playing, I *would* be careful and perhaps rather watchful, too.' She threw a glance at the clock. 'Good-bye, I must go.'

They were too dumbfounded even to hold the door open for her.

'That's the most amazing thing I ever heard,' said Sherlock.

'Damn it, it's *amazing*.'

Mayduke drove a murderous fork into an oyster. 'I wonder if there is anything in it,' he said.

12

Freddie Miller was more than usually restless that night. No, he didn't want any dinner — one was always eating — wasted half one's life at table — or in bed. Food and sleep! That was all that ever happened in England these days.

'The Beak at Bow Street was altogether too fresh this morning,' he complained. 'Stung me a pony for doing forty-two along the Embankment, and suspended my licence for three months. Had the sauce to remember my name and talked to me like a father.' He stopped and mixed himself another cocktail. The fifth. 'Hullo, the gin's nearly out.'

'I wonder it's lasted so long,' said Harley.

Freddie Miller refused to take offence. 'Afraid I shall get tight,' he grinned.

'You will after a few more.'

Freddie shook his head, but put down the bottle. 'Then I'll go dry for a bit. Got to keep my wits about me to-night. Got to make a *coup* somehow.'

Harley pushed back his plate and rang for a servant to clear away. 'Then you'd better hurry up. I'm going to cut out these parties.'

'Why?'

'They've lost the friendly touch — too cut-throat — too much of a business.'

'Oh, rot,' said Freddie. 'What's it matter, anyway?'

He pulled the card table into position, took a pack from the drawer, and tore off the wrapper and began to shuffle expertly.

Cosmo Regan and Collier, who had dined together, were the first arrivals.

Regan, care-free, boisterous, his big schoolboy hands landing with clumsy affection on any shoulder within reach — that this laughing, easy-going hobbledehoy of a man was capable of turning as hard and as cold as steel was not easy to believe by anyone who had not witnessed the transformation.

Collier, lean, static, remote, with pale eyes and a voice so low as to be barely audible, was of a different type. A precise, meticulous officer was he, with a clockwork mind, an astonishing ability for remembering detail.

Hammersley, the next to arrive, was still the same big-hearted fellow of the battery days, conspicuous for long legs and mutilated idioms. He had not yet been demobilised, but was 'pinning down a Home job' and trying 'to psycho the final dregs of conscription not to desert.'

The arrival of Sherlock and Mayduke was heralded by a metrical tattoo on the door knocker. ONE — one and two three — (pause) ONE ONE.

Collier shivered. He had been congratulating himself on their absence. Cads — that's what they were.

'The circus!' said Regan, with a grimace.

To allay the impression that their suspicions had been in any way aroused, the entrance of Sherlock and Mayduke was conducted with excessive exuberance.

'*Faites les jeux, messieurs,*' cried Mayduke, proving familiarity with the casinos of France. '*Faites les jeux. La séance commence à table numéro un.* And let me tell you, young Trevelyan,' he added, 'I'll have your boots off you. I'll have your *boots.*'

He picked up the cards and began to shuffle. The others drew up chairs to the table. Harley was the last to sit down. He felt a curious unwillingness to play — a distaste for the whole business. The day had been flat — unprofitable. It had begun wrong, with the visit to Paula in response to her urgent summons. He had been given a note at her house saying briefly that she didn't wish to see him after all. Joan had gone to Camberley — a duty visit to a relative. A useless sort of day. His meeting with Fawlk two nights before had recurred unpleasantly in his memory.

'Like one of those hunting cats that lie along a bough and wait.'

He wondered what Fawlk and Paula had found to say to one another.

'Table waiting — come along, old man, come along.' From Mayduke.

Harley picked up the cards and started to deal mechanically.

'First knave,' he said.

The first knave fell to Sherlock. Harley swept up the cards and passed them. Sherlock gave the pack to Freddie, who was on his left.

Freddie was always spectacular with a pack of cards. They pattered like rain as he shuffled, and flowed to and fro between his hands.

'As this is one of our last merry meetings, what about doubling the limit?' he suggested.

'Phwat you like,' nodded Regan, for he was Irish.

Hammersley was agreeable, and Collier was the last man in the world to decline a proposal where refusal might be construed to suggest that he was nervous. Mayduke, however, flashed a glance at Sherlock, who responded with a flicker of an eyelid. Harley, as host, could scarcely oppose a majority.

Freddie cut the cards slickly. 'Your deal, sir.'

But Sherlock did not pick them up. 'Double the limit,' he said, 'and we'll have a new deck of cards.'

The suggestion, coming before a single hand had been played, was unusual.

Collier's eyebrows came down critically.

'Phwat's the matter with these?' Regan demanded.

'Nothing in the world, Cosmo,' said the Colonel blandly.

'As the challenged party, he has the right to choose the weapons,' said Mayduke, bringing wit to the rescue.

Harley opened the drawer, and tossed an unopened pack upon the table.

The game began.

It was about eleven o'clock when Freddie Miller began to win. He seemed unable to do wrong. Four times he drew three cards to a pair and filled. About the same time, Harley, who, until then, had done no good, also began to win. Within half an hour they had amassed every chip on the table and were selling them back for I.O.U.s.

During this run of unbroken luck, Sherlock and Mayduke had been eccentrically silent. The Colonel's expression was vigilant and Mayduke's small grey eyes were flickering restlessly between Freddie and their host. He remarked that, while Harley was always ready to double up Freddie Miller's stake, Freddie invariably dropped out when the order was reversed. It was evident that he refused to punt against his friend.

And why? Was it because he knew something — knew better?

Freddie Miller was dealing again. He finished and put the pack down between himself and Sherlock. But before he had time to pick up his own cards, Sherlock's left hand came down flat upon them while his right closed over the remainder of the pack.

'What's the man doing?' asked Collier softly.

Freddie pushed back his chair.

From Regan came a hearty burst of laughter, such as a man will make who witnesses the folly of a child.

'Boys,' said the Colonel, 'let your cards lie. Don't pick 'em up.'

'Why?' Harley demanded.

The Colonel favoured him with an innocent and winsome smile. 'An experiment in counting, dear boy, that's all. Seven of us playing. Thirty-five cards dealt. Leaving, with the Joker, eighteen cards in the pack.'

Swiftly he began to deal the remaining cards face upwards on the table. There were fifteen.

'Fifteen,' said Sherlock. 'Now if we each counted our own cards to make *sure* it isn't a misdeal.'

Once more Regan laughed, but the laugh had lost the quality of humour.

Harley got up. He was white with anger. 'Are you suggesting ——'

'It goes a good way beyond that,' was the answer.

'By God, I thought this was a gentleman's house!' cried Mayduke, jumping up, and sending his chair over with a crash.

'One moment,' said Harley. 'If everyone would stop where they are, we'll get this matter sorted out.'

'We had better, I think,' said Collier softly.

The dealt cards were faced. Two Kings and a Joker were missing.

'Funny, isn't it?' said the Colonel.

Freddie Miller moved to the sideboard for a drink. 'Nice party!' he said. 'Jolly fellars! Charming.'

Whiskey splashed into the glass.

It was Collier who suggested that he should return to the table.

Oh, yes, of course he would — delighted — there was every inducement.

Then Regan, his good humour vanished into a berg of ice: 'Colonel Sherlock, I'd be obliged if you'd run your hands through my pockets, and I suggest that ivery gentleman in this room submits to similar treatment.'

'Damn sound, sir,' Mayduke applauded. 'Spoken like a white man.'

Cosmo Regan shed upon him a blistering glare. 'When I need a nosegay from your garden, I'll ask for it.'

'Look here,' said Hammersley, the easy-going, 'isn't all this rather a mistake? What about putting up the shutters and drifting home?'

But Sherlock held up a hand. 'As senior officer present,' said he, 'I take charge of this affair. Someone has cheated, and I don't leave this room until I know who.'

'You don't — no one leaves,' said Harley. 'But these rooms are mine, and what goes on here is my responsibility. If my guests are asked to turn out their pockets, as host, I claim the privilege of being the first.'

Stripping off his coat and waistcoat, he threw them over a chair.

Mayduke stepped forward with alacrity.

'Not you,' said Harley.

'Eh! What's the matter with me, then?'

'I don't know you well enough to say.'

Mayduke's jaw dropped. 'For sheer nerve!' he exclaimed.

Harley beckoned to Regan with a nod. 'If you'd be good enough.'

Cosmo Regan had the courtesy to make the search a thorough one. But it was the intrepid Mayduke, scarlet with indignation at Harley's affront, who opened the drawer in the card table and, taking out the rejected pack, invited Collier to count the cards aloud.

'It would be easy for anyone sitting with that drawer between their knees —' he suggested pointedly.

Collier's voice, lower than ever, recorded a tight-lipped 'Fifty-two and a Joker.'

'Nothing, av course,' said Regan, dropping Harley's coat on a chair.

The two partners exchanged a look of surprise and disappointment.

Harley Trevelyan had not moved from the centre of the room. Sherlock turned up the chair he had occupied, but the missing cards were not tucked into the webbing on the underside.

Hammersley, who could not endure being fingered on account of ticklishness, had stripped himself to the underwear.

'Me next,' Freddie insisted, 'and don't forget the conjuror's pocket in the leg of my trousers. Nothing up my sleeves but my arms.'

He was the only one present who refused to accept the gravity of the situation. He failed altogether to tune in on the carrier wave of suspicion with which the air was charged.

Sherlock and Mayduke submitted themselves to the search with an ostentatious innocence that was an insult to the company.

'You won't find anything — but go ahead by all means. My letter-case! Certainly. No, that's a photograph. Rather a good looker! What?'

Collier was the last to undergo the ordeal. He bore it in silence, returned to the card table, and mechanically shuffled and reshuffled the pack that Sherlock had refused to play with.

'There's only one exshplanation,' said Regan, buttoning his waistcoat, 'the cards were missing from the pack in the farst inchstance.'

'By gosh, why did no one think of that before?' said Hammersley. In his philosophy any straw was worth grabbing at.

'Because it isn't true,' Collier replied. 'Someone had four kings during the game.'

'I did,' from Harley.

Collier nodded.

'The mystery deepens,' said Freddie.

Mayduke's small, furtive eyes settled upon him. An idea was hovering at the back of them — an idea — no, an inspiration.

'I'm going to get myself a drink,' he said. 'I'm going to get a drink, and I want everyone here to watch me get it.'

Pulling up his sleeves to leave his wrists bare, he approached the sideboard, paused dramatically and lifted high the heavy salver upon which the drinks stood. Beneath it, close to the edge of the sideboard, lay three cards.

'What a crust!' said he. 'It was clever of you, young Miller, to get that drink — but not quite clever enough.'

Everyone, save Collier, turned to Freddie Miller, who, stretched on a tilted chair with his legs thrust out before him and his chin on his shirt-front, was laughing, bitterly — fatalistically.

'Good fielding, Mayduke,' he said. 'Trust a little worm like you to have spotted that pass.'

Harley crossed the room and took him by the shoulders. 'Freddie — Freddie!'

But Freddie wriggled himself free.

'Ah, let me alone, damn you! When a man's out — he's out. Think I'm going to crawl or whine? I go to hell by a path of my own choosing.'

The Colonel's fist crashed into the open palm of his other hand.

'By Heaven and all green stuff! I wouldn't have believed it! I wouldn't have believed it!' he cried. 'One of my own fellars, too. A man I trusted.'

'Ah, shut up!' said Regan.

'What's that?'

'Shut up, ye damned windbag.'

From a corner of the room where he was struggling with his braces buttons, Hammersley was repeating schoolboy fashion, 'Oh, I say — oh, I say.' For he was fond of Freddie Miller.

Only Collier kept aloof from it all, his fingers moving mechanically over the cards spread out before him.

Sherlock had drawn himself up like a guardsman on parade. 'I'll deal with your insult in order,' he began.

'Shut up!' Regan roared. 'This boy worked with me in France, and he was a damned good boy. Phwat's happened to-night can be explained.'

'It'll need to be,' from Mayduke.

'It will be,' said Harley. 'Listen to me, you men. Freddie, here, isn't normal — hasn't been normal for a long time. He got a wipe on the head out there doing a job any man might have been proud of.'

'I'll second that,' from Regan.

Harley took the bit in his teeth and went down the course. Never before had he exhibited in public so much emotion. 'That wipe hasn't had time to settle down. Everyone knows a man in this state can't be judged by normal standards.'

'So I'm ga-ga, eh? I'm for the nonsense house, am I?' crooned Freddie softly. 'Straws in the hair, what?'

Harley gripped his arm. 'Good God, you must be able to see for yourselves. Every man in this room has seen service and knows what I am saying is true. What's happened to-night doesn't count — mustn't count ——'

'It's counted to the tune of sixty-five of the best,' said Mayduke.

'Then let's wash out to-night's winnings and losses, and if you've any doubt about other times you've played here and will look up what you've dropped. I'll ——'

'May I ask a question?' said Collier.

It was the first time he had spoken for so long that his presence was almost forgotten.

'Well?'

'Who bought these cards?'

'I did,' Harley replied.

'And the wrappers were broken in this room to-night?'

'They were.'

'There are two more packs in that drawer. May I see them, please?'

'Is there any need?' said Harley irritably.

'I think there is.'

In silence Collier broke the wrappers and spread the cards out before him.

'Yes,' he said, and nodded. 'Interesting! Miller — where did you learn to fake cards?'

But Freddie had lapsed into a kind of stupor.

Collier repeated the question imperatively.

'Fake cards! Don't know what you mean.' He roused himself. 'Fellar I met showed me how to pull a few court cards and palm 'em.'

'But where did you learn to mark cards with a needle?' Collier insisted.

'Never learnt,' said Freddie; 'don't know what you're jawing about.'

There could be no question as to his sincerity. Shown up, caught out, nothing was to be gained by denial.

Collier turned his attention to Harley. 'These *are* the packs you bought?'

'Yes, I suppose so. Yes, they are.'

Collier rose and pushed back his chair. 'Good-night,' he said shortly.

But Mayduke intercepted him. 'What's up now?'

'When Trevelyan has finished his rhetorical defence of his friend,' Collier answered, 'he may be able to explain his own successes to-night.'

'Look here!' said Harley dangerously.

'And look there!' said Collier, and pointed at the table. 'Four packs of cards and every court card in each pack is marked.' Then, lifting his voice for the first time, 'You bloody hypocritical swine!' He picked up his hat and walked out.

The silence that followed was broken by Freddie. He had been staring at Harley with horror in his eyes. 'No. No,' he cried wildly. 'Show me those cards. I marked them — I marked them —— Yes, look, you can see where I did it. He wouldn't — Harley wouldn't — I know he wouldn't ——'

Cosmo Regan brushed him aside. 'Stick together,' said he; 'it's loikely to be the only company the future will offer ye.'

He went out with Hammersley. Hammersley, who, absurdly enough, looked as if he wanted to cry.

Mayduke waited long enough to tear up his I.O.U.s.

'A very nice outfit,' said the Colonel. 'If you men were still in the service, I'd have you drummed out — *drummed* out.'

The front door closed behind them.

13

The whole sequence of events had happened with such paralysing suddenness that Harley had found neither the inspiration nor the opportunity to put forward a defence. That the charge proved against Freddie should have taken this twist and involved himself had so stunned imagination as to leave him without words.

Freddie's hysterical claim to have marked the cards had deceived no one — Harley least of all. Both alike, they were branded as cheats, and presently — within a few hours — their clubs would know — the world they moved in would know — Joan would know.

With full realisation of the consequences of this ghastly imbroglio, Harley stared at the door slammed by the last of his guests. His nails were dug into the palms of his hands and his breath whistled through shut teeth.

Harley turned at the sound of a man sobbing.

Freddie Miller was standing in the centre of the room, his arms limp to his sides and the tears running down his cheeks. His whole body vibrated with sobs that he made no effort to hide or govern. In the extremity of his grief he was pitiably unashamed. 'Oh! Oh!' he repeated.

But Harley's sympathies were dead to that heart-broken appeal. It sickened him. 'Much good that'll do!' he said.

Freddie Miller lashed out an arm as an hysterical schoolgirl might have done at a hated governess. 'Damn you!' he gasped. 'Oh, damn you, damn you!'

Harley humped a shoulder and turned away.

Freddie Miller pointed at him accusingly. 'My hero — until now. Believed you — not like other men — and you've killed that — murdered it. Joan shan't have you. She shan't.' His voice rose to a high-pitched wail. 'No reason — no excuse.'

'You fool, do you believe it was I who marked those cards?'

'Who else?'

'No — NO, I tell you!'

And Harley knelt beside him on the sofa driving in denial with a shut fist.

Even at the summit of his agony the love Freddie bore for Harley was manifest in every word and look, but at these words it died like a torch thrown into deep water.

'Liar!' he cried, 'dirty rotten liar!' And fled from the room.

The door banged and another beyond. Harley did not move.

Half a minute later, the door was pushed open — an arm appeared and something black described an arc and fell on the sofa beside him. Running feet and the front door slamming so violently that the glasses on the sideboard jingled and buzzed.

The black object was a service revolver — loaded.

14

Harley made no attempt to follow. His resentment had spent itself in the crazy exchange of words they had made, but he had not yet recovered himself enough to feel interest or concern in what might happen to Freddie. The problem of his own inculpation was uppermost. Yet Freddie Miller had given him a lead in selflessness. Freddie had not given a thought to his own future. His had been the agony of a broken belief — not of remorse.

The truth of this did not come to Harley until it was too late to realise its beauty. Like everything else in those hysterical post-war days, the whole affair had been chaotic — charged with emotional complexities — and passionate upheavals. Collier had been the only man who had exercised a clear brain. The rest had been concerned with accusation, indignation, and the violent elements of emotion.

An urgent need to follow Collier's example persuaded Harley to rise and go to the bathroom and sponge his face and wrists with cold water. Afterwards he stood at the open window with the chill night breeze blowing upon him.

Until then, with the possible exception of Fawlk, he had thought of himself as a man without enemies. But it was doubtful if Fawlk even knew where he lived. And was Fawlk the man to think of anything so subtle — so intricate? Harley shook his head. The man was hardly so contemptible as that. And yet it couldn't have been an accident that the cards were marked. Harley returned to the living-room and fingered them meditatively. There was a neatly pricked series of holes at the back of the court cards. One could just feel them with one's thumb when dealing. They conveyed to him quite a meaningless sensation.

If only he could stop thinking of Joan, he felt he could concentrate more clearly. But that was impossible. He found himself wondering if there were any other man in whose mind her vision recurred so obstinately. Perhaps in Fawlk's? There could be little doubt that he admired ——

One was wasting time.

'Come back,' said Harley, and forced his attention to the card table.

He picked up one of the wrappers from the floor and looked at it. A tartan paper wrapper sealed with white wax. Two dabs of white wax. One of the dabs was brownish. Harley brought it nearer to the light. Yes, certainly it was browner than the rest, and the paper near the seal was slightly discoloured. When he pinched it with his fingers, it broke. The other side did not break. The explanation was obvious. The paper had been scorched.

Harley was conscious of a thrill of excitement. And yet, after all, it was obvious that the cards had been tampered with. He examined the rest of the wrappers, but discovered no further evidence of discoloration. Whoever was responsible had been thorough — fiendishly so.

He took his head in his hands and racked his brain for enlightenment. If not by Freddie Miller, how had the marked cards been brought into the flat? It could only have been done by someone who knew the kind of cards he used. Who would know that except Freddie and the men who, for the past few weeks, had formed the poker party? Hammersley, Collier, Regan, Sherlock, Mayduke?

There was no motive — no possible motive.

He began to run over his absences from the flat that day. At ten o'clock he had walked to Paula's. Back again by eleven. He had lunched at one o'clock at the Carfax and returned about two-thirty. Since then he had not gone out.

Assuming the exchange had been made that day, it must have been done between ten and eleven or while he was lunching at the club. Harley looked at his watch. The time was just before midnight. Rising, he went to the lift shaft and rang the bell. In the hall below a gate clashed metallically and the lift droned upward.

'Sir,' said the porter.

'Come in,' said Harley. Then, 'Help yourself to a drink.'

The porter said he could just do with one.

'Who was on duty between ten and eleven this morning?'

'Young Sidney, sir.'

'And during the luncheon hour?'

'Me myself, sir.'

'Did anyone call or ask for me at that time?'

'No, sir. No one as you might say. Two ladies, if you could call them ladies, asked for Mr. Prothero, but ——'

'Does the boy Sidney sleep in the flats?'

'Now does he?' mused the porter, marking time for another drink. 'There's Alice and Fred and the Boots sleeps in. The 'ousekeeper, of course, and Netty ——'

'Answer my question.'

The porter looked hurt. 'No, sir, he doesn't.'

'Thank you, that's all — good-night. Oh! help yourself to another if you want it.'

The porter seemed to think it would do him good, what with the war being over and everything.

'Your 'ealth and prosperity,' he said.

The telephone rang. Harley picked up the receiver.

'Hold the line for a trunk call,' said the operator.

Joan! Ringing up from Camberley.

'Finish that and go,' said Harley, with a gesture of dismissal.

The front door closed discreetly.

Then Joan's voice — rippling.

'Angel.'

'Joan.'

'Back at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon.'

'Joan ——' he began.

But she hated the telephone. Refused to regard it as an instrument of courtship. Lines got crossed. Operators listened in.

'Good-night, angel.'

'Joan,' he said urgently.

'They've rung off. Good-night,' said Trunks.

'Just as well,' Harley thought. 'Just as well.'

15

Freddie Miller left the flats at a run. Up Duke Street and along Piccadilly he ran as though the devil were behind him. Hatless, coatless — wild-eyed — he ploughed through the theatre crowds in the Circus and Shaftesbury Avenue, cursing whoever impeded his progress. A man shouted protestingly, and a constable clutched, but he wriggled free and raced on, turning sharp to the left in Wardour Street and plunging through the open doors of a garage.

The man on night duty grinned a greeting. 'In the usual 'urry, Mr. Miller?'

Freddie swore at him. 'The Colonel's car — I want it.'

The garage was one of the firms by-products, and it was no unusual thing for Freddie to collect Sherlock's car, which looked like an enormous mackerel.

Freddie Miller kicked open the cut-out, spun the engine, and vanished up the narrow thoroughfare with the flat of his hand on the klaxon. His performance in Oxford Street was a combination of lunacy and dexterity. Policemen were too amazed to get the registration numbers before it was too late to see them. He had left London behind him in a quarter of an hour and was sweeping along the Great West Road at between seventy-five and eighty. He had one set purpose in his mind, to see Joan at once before the impulse failed him. He knew that if he delayed, his admiration of Harley would return and undermine his resolution. He must see her instantly — instantly. She must know.

The bungalow where she was staying was just this side of Camberley... He knew the room she would occupy. He could find her — talk to her without a soul in the house being any wiser. What he had to do must be done mercilessly — with a sword. No excuses — no sentiment — no half-truths. The bald, hideous facts about both of them. The two men in the world she loved must be cut clean out at one sweep.

On — on — and the road rolling away under him. A sickle moon flickered between the branches of tall pines. Not much farther to go. A bull's-eye lantern waved somewhere ahead of him. He swerved the car round it and went on.

The open white gates of the bungalow gleamed at a bend of the road. Freddie switched off the engine, dropped into neutral, and coasted through them, bringing the car round with a dry skid on the gravel.

There were no lights in the bungalow, but he could have found his way in the blackest darkness. Often as a boy he ——

Here was Joan's window — wide open, of course, as he had known it would be. All Joan's windows were open.

He vaulted over the sill, landed lightly in the room, heard the rustle of bedclothes, the faint creak of springs, and saw a figure sitting up in bed.

For the moment he was too breathless to speak, but there was not a tremor in the voice that spoke out of the darkness. 'You won't find any jewellery because I hate the stuff, but there's about fourteen shillings in my bag on the dressing-table.'

'Joan,' he whispered.

Instantly she jumped out of bed. 'Freddie — Freddie, you big idiot — I thought —— What's the matter?'

'Had to see you.'

There was no mistaking the agony in his voice.

'Wait till I find the switch.'

He caught and held her. 'No — no light — in the dark. Better in the dark.'

So he was in trouble — bad trouble — and ashamed.

'There!' she said soothingly. 'It's all right, old man. We'll manage something.'

'You can't,' he stammered and began to blubber. Then, 'Blast me! Why can't I keep a stiff upper lip!'

'It's Harley,' said Joan steadily.

'Harley. Yes — both of us. A couple of cheap crooks — that's us.'

A wave of relief went over her. With all her courage she had been afraid. 'Yes, old man — but never mind — if that's all.'

'All!' he repeated savagely. 'Damn it, do you think

I'm mad, too? Hell! That was the excuse he made for me and had nearly convinced 'em when Collier tumbled on the truth.'

'Freddie, stop jargoning. I can't understand a word.' Her voice had hardened.

'Ring him up and ask him. Ring up Collier — Regan — any of the damned crowd. Loyalty won't help. Every damned court card marked, and he'd cleaned up a pile, too. God knows if there'd been a ghost of a chance of believing in him, I'd have taken it. I even lied to the other men — but it was no good. You love him as a woman loves, but I loved him as a man loves, and you can't begin to guess what that means. Hasn't he been my one anchorage at a time when I've jazzed about at the whim of every crazy impulse? Haven't we faced life and death together? Do you think I want to believe my one real pal is just as much of a sham and a rotter as I've become?'

'Tell me everything,' said Joan.

In broken sentences the wretched story was told. At the end Joan was silent for a long while.

'I could understand with you,' she said. 'You're just ill — muddled — but Harley ——' She beat her fists passionately on the pillow. 'I can't believe — I can't — I won't! It 'ud be — blasphemy.'

'You've got to.'

'No, no!' she repeated. 'On the night the papers said he'd been killed, I prayed him alive again. Not for this.'

'Better for both of us if he had been killed,' he answered, took her by the shoulders and held her fast. 'Face it, Joan; you've got to face it.'

Picking up her hand, he crushed it against his cheek.

'There's plenty of better stuff, thank God.'

She saw his shadow moving across the room. 'Where are you going?'

'Clearing out,' and he vaulted over the sill.

A second later she heard the wild tattoo of the engine and the shriek of spinning wheels upon the gravel. The car roared itself away into the hollow silence of the night.

Joan went back from the window and sat on the bed. Dizzy she felt, all dizzy.

'No, not the telephone,' she decided. 'Not even now. To-morrow early — face to face.'

She wanted to see his eyes.

16

The boy Sidney had not arrived at nine o'clock next morning. The housekeeper couldn't understand his absence. He lived in the Waterloo Bridge Road. She would let Harley have the address in a minute.

'I'm sure I can't think what's keeping the boy,' she said.

Harley walked to the stationer's shop in Jermyn Street where he had bought the cards.

The manager was dubious.

'I daresay we've sold three dozen packs in the last few days.'

'Can you remember anyone buying four packs? There'd be counterfoil bills surely.'

There were, and it appeared that in the preceding ninety-two hours no fewer than five people had bought four packs. The various assistants were not very enlightening.

'After all, one serves so many customers, sir. Quite impossible to remember a quarter of 'em. What sort of a person would it be? A lady — a gentleman?'

Harley didn't know.

He returned to the flat. The hall was empty. The boy Sidney had not arrived. He walked up to his own front door and turned the handle. Foolish to leave the front door on the latch like that. Anyone could walk in. Someone had. Must have.

He picked up his unopened letters. One from Joan. No, he decided, not yet, and put it in his pocket. A publisher's statement, a bill — two receipts, and an envelope in Collier's neat, spidery handwriting. Harley ripped it open.

DEAR TREVELYAN,

As a fellow member of the Carfax it is my duty to place the facts of what occurred last night before the committee. As I think it probable you may be going abroad, I shall postpone laying this information until after the week-end.

Yours very truly

F. H. COLLIER

A decent letter, Harley thought. Characteristic of the sender — discipline seasoned by good manners.

A communication from Sherlock and Mayduke was another category. It was couched in the third person — in two third persons. It stated in detail the losses sustained by them at his flat over a period of six weeks. It omitted and ignored any reference to gains. The phrase which composed the final paragraph informed 'Captain Trevelyan that failing immediately satisfaction and discharge of their claim, Colonel Sherlock and Major Mayduke intend to lodge a complaint with the Public Prosecutor.'

Harley locked it away in a drawer of his bureau, picked up the address of the boy Sidney, and was going out when the telephone rang.

He was aware of nerves when he picked up the receiver.

'Trevelyan? Cosmo Regan here.'

'Well,' said Harley.

An awkward pause and a sudden cataract of words. 'Not my mission to preach at a man whin he's taken the count. It's not aisy to droive out affection with a shwape of a broom. Braver toims and doings kape gettin' on their hoind legs askin' to be remimbered. Damn yer eyes, thin, if foive hundred down 'ud open the port to ——'

'Oh, no!' Harley shouted. 'Cut that, for God's sake!'

He hung up the receiver, grabbed his hat, and bolted. He was seeing badly and dashed the back of his hand across his eyes. There was moisture on it.

'Where to?' said the driver of the taxi he hailed.

Harley fished out the address and stared at it without comprehension. 'There, read it yourself,' and pushed the paper into the man's palm.

Presently the taxi stopped at a house in Waterloo Bridge Road.

'Wait,' said Harley.

An elderly woman who opened the door was reluctant to supply information.

'Even a lift boy 'as a right to be ill without bein' sent for as if he was a slave,' she remarked.

Harley explained that he only sought a word with the boy. Nothing was further from his mind than to carry him off from a bed of sickness.

The boy Sidney was in bed. An exotic film paper was spread out before him and a cracked basin was disposed on a backless chair adjacent to his elbow.

'Now, listen to me, Sidney,' said Harley, and explained what had brought him.

The boy Sidney screwed up his face into the lines of thought. 'I can't call to mind anyone arstin' for you, sir. Certain'y not Wednesday — nor Toosday. Yesterday — le's see? 'Tween ten and 'leven, you said? There was a lady wot come. 'Ad a letter to leave. Wouldn't let me take 'er up the lift. Walked up and out again minute later.'

'To my flat?'

'Couldn't say, sir. I was below, y'see — globing my copper rail. Couldn't say 'oo's flat.'

The clue did not lead very far.

'Can you remember what she looked like?'

The boy Sidney's face assumed an expression of admiration that would have become a Romeo.

'She looked,' he said, choosing his words with exquisite care. 'She looked a treat.'

'Now, look here,' said Harley severely, 'you've read police descriptions in the newspapers. Try to describe the woman in that sort of way.'

'Tall, she was — narrer, with a great white face on 'er like as if her lover was dead.'

'What do you mean by that?'

The words were uttered sharply — with a startled inflection.

'Kind o' tragic, sir. She spoke kind o' tragic, too — 'usky.'

Husky! Husky!

'No, no,' said Harley to himself. 'No, no. It's too damned disloyal.'

But in spite of that, he forced the interrogation a stage farther.

'What colour was her hair?'

But the boy Sidney shook his head.

'You know 'ow it is with these 'ats they wear nowadays. I reckon a woman's glory is a thing o' the past. I reckon ——'

He stopped suddenly and an arm trailed out feelingly towards where the basin had been.

'Here you are,' said Harley.

Also he left a pound for the boy Sidney.

As he went from the room, the sufferer remarked from a pendant attitude, 'You might tell Auntie, sir.'

17

Harley told the taximan to drive to Paula's house in Clarges Street, but cancelled the instruction a minute later. After all the boy's description might have applied to a thousand women. So many nowadays wore the mask of tragedy — that look as if a lover had died.

A man will not readily believe that a woman's love for him can turn to hate. He dismissed the taxi in Saint James's Street and walked.

Mechanically he found himself mounting the steps of the Carfax — stopped abruptly, and descended them. A man passing on the pavement emitted a cynical 'Ah!' and, when almost out of earshot, added, 'Remembered just in time.' It was Mayduke.

Mastering an impulse to follow and knock him down, Harley set his teeth and crossed the road to the shady side. It was his first experience of being a pariah in London. He wondered how far the news had spread — cursed himself for walking Saint James's Street, of all places, and shied off into the narrows leading to the Ritz.

No stone unturned. Not even a pebble. He found himself walking with his head down — hiding under the brim of his hat. The sudden consciousness of doing this disgusted and angered and brought him back to attention. Even though he had in a few hours become an outcast, there was no excuse for looking the part.

At Paula's house a maid informed him that her mistress was out, but he was welcome to wait.

'Will she be long?'

'I couldn't say, I'm sure. Very erratic these days. Never been the same since poor Master David ——'

Harley was shown into the orange-and-black drawing-room. The smell of ambergris, Paula's scent, was heavy in the air. Would he care for an illustrated paper? No, thanks. He was left alone.

Harley sank into a chair before a writing-table in the window recess and took his head in his hands. Under his elbows was a blotter with orange blotting-paper. A strand of black thread trailed across it. Harley picked up the thread and fiddled with it. A needle was attached. A clumsy skewer of a needle that pierced the blotting-paper. He wondered vaguely at finding anything so domestic on Paula's table — Paula, who had never sewed on a button or darned a sock; Paula of the yellow-backed books, Russian novels, and cigarettes; Paula of the restless swinging toe.

A needle. Fumbling with it he pricked his thumb and started violently.

What was a needle doing there, anyway?

Four packs of cards pricked with a needle.

Angrily and with force enough to have thrown a brick across the street, he flung the little shining thing down on the table.

Sick and angry with himself, he picked up a book and dropped into an armchair before the fire.

Outside, the fog thickened — darkness gathered. The printed words on the title-page were unreadable. Harley switched on a table lamp, but no light came. He shook it irritably, but without effect. Probably the wall plug was out, he thought. No, the plug with its length of flex was fixed in the skirting. He pushed back his chair to make sure it was making contact. Something bright at the end of the wire shone between his feet.

An electric iron. Harley stared at it as at a snake.

In the hall below a voice sounded — two voices.

'Who?'

The answer was inaudible.

'You'd no right.'

Footsteps running up the stairs.

Harley was on his feet when the door opened.

Paula's figure was a black silhouette against the glow from the lamp in the hall below.

'I didn't ask you to come here. Please go.'

'Let's have the door shut,' he said.

'Go. After what's happened — what I've heard — I want you to go.'

'Not yet, Paula.'

Crossing, he closed the door and switched on the lights.

Her eyes were blazing hate at him.

Why hate? he wondered. Disgust, disappointment, yes — but why hate?

'Paula, what have you heard, and how?'

It was difficult — almost impossible for her to speak. She wanted to snarl. She managed, 'This morning — everything. From Colonel Sherlock. A common cheat — a sharper. Did you learn those clever tricks in the shelter of a prisoners' camp?'

The word 'shelter' puzzled him. He could not believe it to be her own inspiration.

'No,' he said, and shook his head. 'No, from a woman.'

'Joan, perhaps. Why not? It's in the blood. Her own brother ——'

'Not Joan,' he answered simply. 'Joan is good. This was done by someone bad — wicked — a damnable woman.'

She laughed an ugly laugh. 'I thought you were above the machinations of bad women. Moral rectitude was your show card.'

'Yes, until someone pricked the back of it with a needle — this needle.' And crossing he picked it up from the writing table.

'What a fool!' said Paula. 'What a fool!' and went on laughing.

'Presently,' said Harley. 'Presently, you and I will pay some calls together. A number of calls. A scandal like last night's spreads quickly. You had better decide what you will say, for whatever you say must be very complete.'

'What I shall say!' she echoed. 'I — I! What has your being found out to do with me?'

He rang the bell and waited in silence until the maid came. Bewildered, Paula looked at the girl and at Harley.

Inspiration came to her rescue. 'Show Captain Trevelyan out.'

'No, no,' said Harley, 'it wasn't for that you rang — you've forgotten.' Then to the maid, 'Your mistress wanted you to take away the electric iron.'

He pointed to where it lay. The maid collected the iron and went out.

The confidence Paula had recovered was slipping away. 'That proves nothing. Nothing at all.'

'It proves how far jealousy drives a woman,'

'Jealousy,' she repeated. 'So you think that.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I must, now. I didn't accept that motive willingly. I had believed that tag of jealousy turning love to hate was the wisdom of the novelette. I was wrong.'

Never in her life had Paula thought with such disgust of any man. The vulgarity of his charge nauseated her. But it proved that he was unaware that she knew the truth.

'Believe what you like,' she said.

'So I will,' he nodded, 'and you must help others to believe it.' He looked at his watch. 'In five minutes we start our round. With Joan.'

'Willingly,' she answered. 'I shall be glad to be present when she learns the facts about you.'

'We must make sure they are the facts,' said he. 'Nothing less will do. You may do the talking, Paula. You can start with the visit you paid to my flat yesterday morning and the few words you exchanged with the lift boy in the hall.'

She had not expected he had traced her movements so closely. Surprise scared most of her wits away. 'It's a lie! After what's happened, who'll believe you? Or the word of a boy bribed to ——'

He took her by the shoulders, forced her into a chair and stood over her menacingly. 'Stay there, and listen to me. What harm have I done to you that you should do this foul thing? Was it my fault I couldn't love you? One doesn't love, to be obliging. At least, I've given what friendship could give.'

'Friendship? You ——'

'What happened in France with David counts for nothing, then?'

'You dare!' she gasped; 'you dare speak of David — when but for you he might be alive to-day!'

The anger died out of his face. 'What are you saying?'

'The truth. I know it. The truth about a coward and a cheat.'

'Go on.'

'You tried to cheat him of his leave and, failing that, you sent him to his death.'

Harley shook his head. She was mad — mad.

Once away, the words poured from her in a spate.

Harley had released his hold and stood back amazed. At last, 'It was Fawlk who told you this?'

'Yes.'

Harley held up a hand in a gesture of despair. 'And you believed that story?'

'It was true.'

'Oh, my God!' he muttered pityingly. Suddenly his muscles stiffened. 'Where is he?'

Paula shook her head. 'Gone. He left England this morning.'

He made an impulsive movement as though to follow, but checked himself at the uselessness of it.

'And between you you worked out this ——' He left the sentence unfinished.

Paula nodded.

'I must find him — bring him back,' he said slowly. Then to her, 'You let him go?'

'I saw him off. I told him what had happened and saw him off.'

There was triumph in her eyes — the triumph of one who has succeeded absolutely.

'You let him go ——' he repeated. 'You and he in partnership together to avenge David's death.'

Still triumphant, she nodded.

'Paula,' he said savagely, 'five minutes before David was killed, he struck that man in the mouth.'

'You can't save yourself with lies,' she said.

But Harley went on. 'We were there alone in a bit of a stable. Fawlk accused David of cowardice and David struck him and ran out into the night. It would have meant a court-martial — a sentence of death — and Fawlk called on me to give evidence. I refused, for if ever a man deserved a blow, he did — I refused. A few minutes afterwards came the news that David was dead. So you see there was no court-martial, but Evan Fawlk has been waiting for me ever since.'

Paula's breathing seemed to have stopped. 'No — no — I don't believe ——'

'And I can't make you believe,' he said, 'but it's the simple truth.'

She got up and stared at him, her eyes drilling into the secret recesses of his soul — if he possessed a soul. The very fact that he made no further attempt to convince her lent to the story a credibility impossible to deny.

'But why, why ——' came from her in a strangled voice.

'I have known that man to lie in wait for weeks and weeks to trip and break an N.C.O. for a trifling offence. He would not readily forgive what happened that night.'

'Ah, don't!' she pleaded. 'Don't — it's awful — horrible!'

'Not worse than what has happened since,' he answered bitterly. 'Well, Paula, are you coming with me to Joan?'

But the room about her was beginning to spin — the floor quaked — the walls tottered. The ceiling was rising — falling — falling. Harley caught her in his arms.

18

Joan's two-seater was parked against the railings of the Square when the taxi drew up before the house. Paula had scarcely spoken since she had fainted an hour earlier. A few disconnected utterances and that was all. She sat forward in the taxi staring at nothing, unless it were into the past or the future.

'I struck him, too,' she muttered. 'Beast! Beast! I've touched him — his face — with this hand.' She smeared her fingers against each other. 'To Africa — Africa! Steamship La Pierrette. Bound for Tajura.'

'Better wait in the taxi,' Harley said, but even the simplest things no longer reached her understanding. She followed him up the steps like someone in a trance.

Harley rang, and in a distant part of the house the bell tolled dismally. They waited, and he rang again.

Old Rogers, who opened the door, drew back on seeing Harley, then stepped forward to bar the way. Although his face was white, his eyes were curiously red.

'Miss Joan ——' Harley began.

'The family can see no one.'

'Those were your orders?'

'Yes, sir.'

The 'sir' was uttered with difficulty.

'Do they refer particularly to me?'

Old Rogers nodded — grimly — mouth tight shut.

'Can you tell me, then, where I can find Mr. Freddie?'

The old servant's face flushed to a dark crimson. 'How can you ask that, as if you didn't know?'

'Know — know what?'

'Mister — Master Freddie drove his car into and through the parapet of Staines Bridge. The body ——'

Harley's hand shot out and clutched him. 'Body — what do you mean, man?'

'Don't lay an 'and on me — he's dead,' wailed Rogers.

Groping like a blind man, Paula made her way back to the taxi. Harley followed.

As they reached the lowest step, Rogers remembered something. 'A message from Miss Joan for you.'

Harley turned. 'Yes?'

'Neither to write or call — ever.'

The door closed.

As Harley tried to enter the taxi, Paula thrust out a hand to keep him away.

'I must go alone — I'm a murderess, don't you understand — a murderess! I can never tell her now —' Then, in a voice of terror to the driver, 'Anywhere — anywhere.'

She left Harley standing on the pavement.

19

In the mental torment of the hours that followed, Harley was aware of only one clear thought — Evan Fawlk. In face of the tragic development of last night's affair, it was no longer thinkable or possible to cast upon Paula's shoulders the burden of responsibility. With a quixotic gesture Harley dismissed any further thought of clearing himself at the expense of a confession from Paula. The blame rested upon Evan Fawlk, and to Evan Fawlk he would go for satisfaction.

Mindful of what Paula had said, he had verified the sailing of S.S. Pierrette and had ascertained by telephone to the shipping office that she would call at Taranto. By going overland the following morning, it would be possible, even in the present disordered state of trans-Continental railroads, to intercept the boat at Taranto in the heel of Italy. As to what would happen when they met, there was no need for thought. He would compel Fawlk to speak the truth, even though it were tortured out of him.

The determination to carry out that object was the only solace left to Harley. In a single day by a blow in the dark he had been stripped of all his goods. Love — friendship — honour. There should be no half-measures in the manner he chose to recover them. The black hatred that now centred around his thoughts of Evan Fawlk had become the dominant motive of his life. Paula had passed beyond reckoning — crushed out by a calamity that she, in an act of vengeful blindness, had never even envisaged.

Gay, slap-stick, care-free Freddie Miller, laughing his way through life and wearing a frown at the end. He found himself remembering times they had spent together — jolly times — old 'Varsity rags — the insanest follies many of them, but very endearing in retrospect.

'He died thinking I was a scab,' Harley thought. 'As she thinks now — as the world thinks now.'

Didn't straighten up coming off the Egham Road. That could mean only one thing. He had gone to see Joan before he died. Had told her everything.

'Must've hit that coping about eighty!' That was no accident. The war had not yet done with its greediness and destruction.

Arrived at his rooms, Harley began to pack. He would travel light. Just a suitcase.

For some minutes he played with the revolver Freddie had tossed to him the night before. 'No,' he said, and dropped it in a drawer.

From a nail in the hall he took an old African sjambok — buffalo hide — heavy, but whippy. The feel of it in his hand was good. It made him think of those hunched-up shoulders of Fawlk's.

The train left Victoria at ten next morning — then Folkestone — the Channel — across France and south — south.

Lympne. Planes still were going to and from France, and he knew a Flight Commander who — surely something could be done to recover the time he must lose. Something would have to be done. Should be done. There must be no mistake.

He rang up Paula's house before leaving town. But Paula had gone.

'She left yesterday afternoon, sir.'

Where? The maid didn't know. Abroad, perhaps — a Continental Bradshaw was open on the table. Her mistress had seemed very strange. Dazed. Packed a few things and went without a word.

20

Harley arrived at the aërodrome at Lympne at three o'clock and found the man he sought two minutes after passing the sentry. The man's name was Liverstock, and, true to the traditions of the Air Force, not being engaged in ethereal enterprise, he was occupied in gallantry of another kind, equally sublime. In short, he was writing a nice letter to a girl. That she was a pretty girl was in no doubt, since there were seventeen photographs of pretty girls on the green-baize top of his writing-table and it was reasonable to suppose one of them would receive the letter.

Liverstock had proceeded as far as 'Darling' — blot — when Harley loomed in and stated his needs.

'Want to get to France,' he repeated. 'Haven't you had enough of it in the last four years?'

'I want to get to Paris,' said Harley.

'Shame!' said Liverstock inconsequently, and laid the seventeen damsels face downward, that they might not overhear what promised to be a good story.

'Paris and the Rome express by six o'clock to-night.'

Liverstock held up his hands. 'Kamerad! Why must everyone conspire to lose me my job? It's a nice job, too. If the bus crashed and a dead civvy was found in the wreckage, look at the mess I'd be in.'

'Liverstock ——' Harley began.

'Honestly, old cheese, no can do!'

'But you will, all the same.'

'Why will I?'

'Because I'm going to break a man's neck,' said Harley.

The unexpected sincerity of this promise resounded with the force of an order from G.H.Q. It was, of course, contrary to all regulations to fly civilians, but a B.E. 2.6 happened to be flipping across to Abbeville that afternoon, and, as any flying man knows, there's precious little air between Abbeville and Le Bourget. Besides, flying men are justly famed for doing what is forbidden and not telling on each other afterwards.

The pilot, a young man named Pink — in which condition he appeared to be — welcomed Harley and stowed him away in the observer's 'pew' with the fastidious nicety of George Robey at his best. As a *quid pro quo*, he persuaded Liverstock to let him take the night off in Paris — there were always despatches in which to wrap up these irregularities — and report to Abbeville the following morning. To this Liverstock readily consented. He had returned to 'Darling — blot' when the yowl of the engine informed him that the plane was already up.

21

Apart from an aptitude for aërial navigation and dexterity in handling the 'joy stick,' Mr. Pink proved a talkative young man who shouted away undeterred by the roar of the engine. Harley neither heard nor listened, and, doubtless, on that account, missed some racy narratives of the air. With the drone of the engines, the fading away of land into water with land beyond, a sensation, if not of peace, then of partial satisfaction, possessed him. The chase had begun, and he did not concern himself with much outside or beyond this realisation.

Harley was not a man who rehearsed events before their happening. He had no very clear plan which he intended to adopt when he and Fawlk should come to grips. That was a matter which could be left to the inspiration and emergency of the moment. He did not underrate the metal of his adversary, nor did he blindly convince himself that all would be well. The cunningly contrived plot against himself into which Fawlk had by lies seduced Paula into taking part had not left many loopholes for failure.

Looking back on their association together, Harley saw how like the man the whole intricate underhand business had been. Fawlk's affection for abstract rather than direct methods exemplified itself clearly in this. Here, as in his appreciation for art, was that angular breakaway from the Victorians.

Nothing short of a voluntary confession would ever wipe out the stain which, spreading since Freddie Miller's death, threatened to blacken his name, honour, and future. A voluntary confession in the presence of a witness was the only possible solution, but neither optimism nor determination could wholly convince Harley of his power to secure it. He could imagine Fawlk's extrications — avoidances — and the Sadist pleasure he would extract from the whole situation. He had been clever enough to avoid incriminating himself in the slightest degree. There was not a shred of evidence against him, except the bare word of an hysterical woman whom he had used as a cat's-paw. As in the case of David Drayton, the blow had been struck in the absence of a witness.

It was strange how little resentment Harley felt towards Paula, now that he realised by what motives of loyalty to her dead brother her actions had been inspired. Before they set out together to see Joan, she had told him how she had waited in his flat to put a bullet through his brain and in waiting had recalled Fawlk's words, 'Death is the least of our punishments,' and had conceived a vengeance more subtle and merciless. Paula, primitive, rash, intemperate — the victim of her own desires, the sport of changing emotions — could not be ruled by standards to which she avowed no adherence. Deep down in his heart Harley discovered a sympathy for her.

Over the fringes of France the B.E. 2.6 drilled through a cloudbank. Beyond it spread a chequered landscape of fields, villages, hutments, and dumps of discarded war material. Like grey threads tightly drawn ran roads and railways, vanishing into the measureless arc of the horizon.

A glow from the falling sun, clouds that blotted out the world with billows of spongy grey, stinging beads of rain — then the sun again setting fire to the roofs and spires of a city and casting spectral shadows over the surrounding fields.

22

Thanks to Mr. Pink and the elasticity with which official embargoes are translated by those blithe spirits who patrol the air, a car was forthcoming at the aërodrome on the outskirts of Paris, into which Harley and a number of young men in pursuit of an artificial paradise crammed themselves. For what, they argued, was the use of peace if a certain amount of good will and fellowship were not included? They bore Harley company to his carriage on the Rome express, which he succeeded in catching by a margin of two minutes.

After the rush to Paris by car and air and car again, the monotony of railway travel irked Harley beyond endurance. The train was crowded with all classes and conditions of men, women, and children. Even the communicating corridors were camping grounds.

France was busy readjusting the disposition of its personnel. A surprising company. Political delegates — families returning to what had been war areas and occupied territory — members of the Italian H.Q. Staff — American officers from Paris leave going to Châlons — demobilised poilus, British brass hats, nurses, and a sprinkling of convalescents travelling to the sanatoriums of the South.

In that jostle of tight-packed humanity, thought was impossible. The atmosphere was heavy and thick with the reek of tobacco smoke, leather accoutrements, cheap perfumes, breath, bodies, garlic, hair oil, and boots. A suffocating atmosphere!

Harley and a stout uniformed American were united in a strongly opposed attempt to have a window down.

'Body of a cat!' protested a young French officer, with enough decorations on his breast to furnish a Christmas tree. 'Have we not had air enough in the last four years?'

A compromise was effected by ventilating the carriage during the incessant and interminable stops for which the journey was remarkable.

Those stops were the severest trial of all to Harley. It seemed as though everything conspired to render it impossible for him to reach Taranto in time. They stopped at stations and between stations; they stopped on sidings to allow specials to go by; they stopped to correct mechanical defects or to hit the grease boxes with inquisitive hammers. Even at level crossings they reversed the usual order and stopped to give passage to the road traffic. Never, Harley felt, had there been a journey so meticulously tortured by punctuation.

His American ally, with whom he had effected a travelling friendship, classified the various stops under the headings of commas, colons, full stops. Once, when the train pulled up for no apparent reason, he remarked bitterly, 'Well, I guess this is just a question mark.'

23

Lady Miller was still knitting a Balaclava helmet. She had acquired the habit during the war and peace had failed to break it. And, as on the first night Harley had come to the house, she was knitting it with rainbow wool. In the blackness which had so suddenly descended upon them, the bright prismatic colours afforded a false sense of relief.

Lady Miller was not crying. For the last four years she had schooled herself to be ready for the misery which had now befallen them. She had never truly believed such a madcap fellow as her boy would come safely through. The manner of his dying was of little consequence. The slur against his honour, which the coroner's jury in their verdict had sought to mitigate, meant nothing to her.

'Mother.'

Joan spoke from a dark recess in the room, where, chin on knees and hands embracing her ankles, she had sat a full hour in silence.

'Dear.'

'I feel' — said Joan, and her voice was all over the place — 'I feel I'm going to crack — going to jack up.'

Lady Miller's needles stopped clicking. 'I know,' she nodded. 'It's sitting here — with nothing to do, and you're not old enough.'

'What do you mean?'

'I can remember, but you can only think, and that makes all the difference.'

'If there was something one could do!'

Lady Miller dropped the rainbow Balaclava into her lap.

'But isn't there? You could join your father — that would be something.'

'In British East?' There was sudden excitement in Joan's voice.

'Why not?'

Joan shook her head. 'And leave you alone?'

Lady Miller smiled. 'I am never alone,' she answered. 'I don't have to have company not to be alone. You wouldn't understand that, but it isn't what's happening to me that matters, but what has happened.'

Joan shook her head. 'You just say so.'

'I mean it. And think what a lovely surprise for the Baron! Look, there's a sailing list on that table.'

A moment later, the extension on the writing-table purred softly.

'Shall I?'

'I will,' said Joan and picked up the receiver.

Rogers's voice announced, 'A trunk call for you, miss, from Southampton.'

Harley, thought Joan, made a movement as if to return the receiver to its bracket, stiffened, nodded and said: 'Very well.'

The line hummed on a different key — a mutter of voices — the faint jar of a buzzer and then clearly. 'You're through to Grosvenor, Southampton.'

Click! And a woman speaking. Crazily — torrentially.

'Who? Talk slower, I can't hear you. Paula Drayton? Well?'

Joan's voice was dull — resentful — disinterested. 'Well?'

From where she sat Lady Miller could hear a flow of words slurred into an insect hum — into the rustle of grasshopper legs — the swish of waves running over sand.

Then from Joan a startled cry — savage, yet exultant. 'You — you! Go on!'

And now a wind was sweeping through pines — gusty — stormy — a gale of words.

Paula Drayton did not spare herself. From the telephone booth in Southampton Docks she laid bare her soul and crucified it over seventy miles of thrilling, quivering line.

Joan's cry — 'Harley — where's Harley?' — was lost.

Paula had dropped the receiver and run — run to where the steamship waited at the quay.

'Harley!' Joan cried again, but the line was dead.

'Southampton has cut off now,' lilted Grosvenor.

Joan did not speak. Breathless, panting, she was hammering the receiver bracket with the heel of her hand.

'Yes, yes, yes, number, please?' came protestingly.

Joan shouted the number.

The exchange clerk in Harley's chambers at Duke Street put back a pert 'Who do you want?'

'Captain Trevelyan?'

'Not here,' a sniff; 'gorn abroad, I believe.'

Joan turned to her mother with panic in her eyes. 'Can't tell you now — but it's all right — no, all wrong — he's gone — gone!' The last word was a cry.

'Gone where?'

Illumination came. 'To follow him, of course — to follow Fawlk.'

Half-crying, half-laughing, she ran towards the door — stopped and turned.

'Mother — if you meant that about going abroad — yes, yes, I will — I want to — must.'

'Surely it's too late to start this afternoon,' said Lady Miller.

'But not too late to find out where he's gone,' said Joan over her shoulder, and fled.

24

Evan Fawlk had finished a letter to Joan and was reading it for the third time to the accompaniment of a cigar. It was a singularly perfect letter — frank, subtle, and interspersed with some admirable but not too apparent spade work. She might be surprised that he knew about the unfortunate card party. He had heard of it by chance an hour before sailing. From intimate knowledge of both Trevelyan and her brother, it was his duty to offer assurance that the latter was in no way to blame.

> I am confident [he wrote] that your brother, out of a sense of misguided loyalty, took the burden on his own shoulders to save his friend. Had I not been leaving England, I should have made a point of calling on every individual member of that card party and putting before them facts about Trevelyan which must inevitably have made them accept my view of the case. I was once rash enough to suggest to you that Trevelyan was not the man you believed him to be. I regret that the truth of my words should have been brought home to you at such cost and pain. I say now — without fear of contradiction — that he is a liar, a cheat, and a coward. Equally sincerely I say that your brother is one of the straightest men I have had the privilege of knowing.

There was more couched in the vein of 'I must be cruel to be kind.' The letter ended forcefully with

> When I return from Africa in a few months' time, I *intend* to call on you and disclose certain facts which hitherto I have kept to myself.

Evan Fawlk rolled the cigar appreciatively in his mouth and nodded. A clean, smacking letter — look at it how you would. An honest, downright letter — no humbug about it.

That Joan's brother should have become mixed up in the affair was unfortunate, but, even so, Fawlk felt he had contrived to turn this startling *dénouement* to advantage. No doubt the boy would wriggle out of it somehow, especially if a rumour was spread that he had been the scapegoat of an older man.

He was reading the letter for the fourth time when the smoke-room steward laid a marconigram on the table before him.

Mildly wondering, he broke the folded sheet and read:

F. M. has killed himself. Return to England and explain. You must.

P. D.

Great Western Hotel, Southampton.

F. M.? Frederick Miller. P. D.? Paula Drayton.

Evan Fawlk stared at the paper and licked his lips.

Here was an unforeseen development — awkward — disastrous, perhaps.

Why should she ask him to return? Panic? Lost her nerve? Scared out of her wits?

His cigar went out, but he did not relight it.

After all, there was nothing to worry about so far as Paula was concerned. There was no danger that she would give herself away — or him.

He caressed his cheek where a few days before she had struck him. In imagination it tingled resentfully. Let her suffer. Why not?

He took a marconigram blank from the rack and wrote in his neat finicky characters:

Paula Drayton, Great Western Hotel, Southampton.
No.

E. F.

Then to the steward: 'Have that radioed at once, please.'

The letter to Joan lay before him on the blotting-pad. It was no use now. A pity. Such a good letter. He tore it into confetti. An uncongenial task. He hated to destroy anything of his own creation.

A passenger breezed in and called for a drink. 'What about you?' he queried.

Evan Fawlk smiled a sour refusal.

'Heard the latest? Not stopping at Taranto, after all. Some trouble with the Italian naval authorities. Putting into Naples instead.'

Evan Fawlk went on tearing up the letter.

25

'There is nothing in the world to do at Naples but hold one's nose, buy pink coral or gloves, refuse the importunities of guides and beggars, and avoid drowning oneself in the enormous holes in the roadway. What is there in that to tempt me to go ashore?' asked Evan Fawlk.

But after the main body of passengers had gone down the companion ladder, the smell of rotting fish, the snorting of donkey engines, the jangle of derrick chains, and an ever-settling pall of coal dust drove him from the ship in disgust.

Naples at the end of the war was even worse than his phrases had painted it. Beggars swarmed. Hungry and dilapidated troops, many without boots to their feet, loafed the streets or sprawled in corpse-like postures in shady corners. The few fiacres by the quay had already been absorbed by the first to disembark and the tram-cars seethed with unsavoury passengers. Evan Fawlk had no choice but to walk.

A guide stepped up with an inviting programme.

'Do you mind very much going to hell?' said Evan Fawlk sleekly.

The guide was in no way offended. Indeed, he volunteered to take the gentleman to any kind of hell his imagination suggested.

Evan Fawlk was framing an appropriate reply when he saw something so startling that he stepped into a recess between two shops.

'Get away!' he barked, with such venom that the guide had no choice but to obey.

In doing so, he collided violently with a tall man carrying a suitcase, who was racing down the street in a hurry. The tall man swore and strode on.

'Begga pardon, but you wanta guide.'

'No,' said the tall man, without turning; then stopped suddenly and said, 'Yes. Where can I hire a car — a fast car?'

'You wanta to see Vesuvius — you goa Pompeii?'

'I want a car to take me to Taranto.'

'Taranto very long way. Naval base, nothing to see Taranto. Now I showa to you somping very nice.'

But the tall man did not wait. He started off down the street again with long, devouring strides.

Evan Fawlk came out of the recess, and his breath escaped with a hiss.

'Trevelyan, and he wants a car to take him to Taranto. That could only mean ——'

— One thing. Paula Drayton had told the truth. This was pursuit. A fool he had been, a fool to work with a woman. How much had she told? To whom had she spoken? Harley Trevelyan had lost no time. Something in his face showed that he meant business.

For one moment Evan Fawlk was afraid. The next he broke into a fit of uncontrolled laughter. For wasn't Fate clearly at work on his side?

Trevelyan didn't know — couldn't know that the steamer's port of call had been changed. To-morrow he would be waiting at Taranto for a ship that would not come. The chase would collapse at the first fence. Not much danger of their meeting after that. The part of Africa to which his business took him was hardly likely to be penetrated by a man who didn't know the ropes. And if it were, a situation would arise that he could trust himself to handle.

Funny! It was hugely funny!

A desire to see the joke through took possession of him. Crossing the road, he addressed himself to a policeman. Could the officer be so kind as to direct him to the road an automobile would take that was bound for Taranto? The officer would, could, and did.

Evan Fawlk hired a fiacre and drove to the outskirts of the town. Here he instructed the driver to wait, seated himself at a café table on the pavement, and called for a bottle of Chianti.

He did not have long to wait before a grey-scarred old soldier of a car came whirling along in a cloud of dust. Harley Trevelyan was beside the driver, his eyes on the road ahead, his mouth set grimly. Evan Fawlk waved at the vanishing dust cloud.

26

At a village under the broad shoulders of Vesuvius, the driver of the hired car ventured a question: 'Does the Signor visit Taranto on business connected with the fleet?'

Harley shook his head and muttered something about a liner — La Pierrette. 'But, Signor! La Pierrette put into Naples this morning.'

Harley did not appear to be listening. The words had failed to penetrate the isolation in which he had lost himself.

'A cousin of mine, Antonio, is cook on La Pierrette and rang me on the telephone from the docks.'

'What's that?'

The driver repeated what he had said and added: 'Some little difficulty with the naval authorities — wherefore they berthed at Napoli in place of Taranto.'

'Turn round — go back!' said Harley. 'And drive!'

With a smashed back spring cobbled up with lashings of iron wire and a wooden block, the grey car lurched through the dock gates as the steamer La Pierrette cast her moorings and thrashed out into the bay.

Evan Fawlk had won the second heat.

END OF BOOK II

BOOK III

I

'HAMDU LILLAH! (Thanks be to God!) We shall have water to-night.' Thus spoke Ashrem, the harelip, holding up his yellow palms in a gesture of praise.

He was not a pretty sight, Ashrem, his cauliflower head dyed red with quicklime, and rendered lustrous with the rancid fat of sheeps' tails. His cotton robe was also red, stained by the impalpable red dust of the Jehama. About his throat was a necklace made from the entrails of an antelope, to which was attached a copy of the Koran.

Ashrem carried in one hand a rifle and in the other a fifteen-foot leather-thonged whip — the terror, although he had never been known to use it, of the native bearers. It was reputed that so great was the power of Ashrem's arm that he could, with a single cut of the whip, sever a man's head from his shoulders. There is no doubt that with it he produced terrifying sounds. *Swish — crack!*

'On, get on!'

Man and beast alike feared it, and none could say to what extent it had proved responsible for goading that wretched company over deserts of loose sand, punctured by the myriad holes of land crabs, across iron-bound volcanic wastes, and through the mephitic stenches of marsh and lake that had made of the journey from the coast one unrelieved torture.

Save for Ashrem the journey had been impossible, but Ashrem's life had gone to prove the possibility of much that was impossible. Born in a Gothic-roofed hut of mud and reeds somewhere in the Danakil country, he had drifted to the seaboard and thence by many ports to Montagu Square, Bloomsbury, and a law degree at the London University. But the call of the wild had whispered to him in crowded Cheapside and by various stages of travel and forgetfulness he returned to his own people.

In an African port full of liars, cheats, and boasters, he had encountered Harley — a tall, spare man who travelled light, with not much more than a single purpose to support his needs.

'If the English lord wishes to shoot a lion, I, Ashrem, will lead him to where the finest may be found.'

Harley shook his head. 'It is a man I seek,' he said shortly.

Ashrem remembered very well the man. From childhood he remembered that man, and hunched up his shoulders and stressed a word here and there to prove that he did not speak in vain.

This same man was known and feared over many thousands of miles of the African continent.

'Sometimes it is gold or gum or ivory he seeks to buy — sometimes he has slaves and women to sell.'

'I want that man,' Harley repeated.

Ashrem read something in Harley's eyes — something primitive. 'For a vengeance?'

Harley nodded.

'To kill?' And Ashrem stabbed the air downward — turned his wrist and wrenched the empty hand upward. 'Awey birooah! I have slain my foe.'

White teeth flashed in the sunlight.

Harley shook his head.

'Alive?'

That was more difficult — less attractive.

'It might be done,' he said, 'but the man is cunning — wise. Also he travels with many bearers and many rifles.'

'It must be done,' said Harley.

'It shall be. I, Ashrem, who have stolen a young wild ass from its mother, say that it shall be done.'

And then began the endless haggling for camels and mules, threats and promises to native bearers, and the getting together of stores. When at last they moved from the steaming coastal town, Evan Fawlk had had five weeks' start of them.

Ashrem was not discouraged. 'Vengeance travels swifter than trade,' said he, 'and the man we seek will march to the greediness of his own purse.'

Harley's thoughts, concentrated on the future, took no heed of the hardships and miseries of that journey. The war had inured him to discomfort and danger. He was uncomplaining of the heat, sometimes one hundred and twenty-six degrees; of the flies, of thirst, of the stifling exudations from the mouths of rubbish-fed camels which by night formed a bubbling, grumbling, roaring circle round the camp.

His one concern was to get on — to make up the lost time for which accident and fate and the nerve-breaking dilatoriness and indecision of his followers had been responsible.

There had been many backsliders on the way — men who, setting at nought their ruling passion of avarice, had cut a camel's head and heel ropes and slipped away under cover of darkness. There had been brushes with hill thieves and Bedouin marauders. There had been sickness and blindness — and one or two private murders to relieve the monotony. As day by day brought them nearer their goal, the little party had dwindled sadly.

But what was left went on — to the crack of Ashrem's whip, the exhortation of his enormous voice, and at the spur of Harley's grim, close-shut mouth and tireless energy.

The path narrowed into a rock-walled chasm towering a hundred feet on either hand and opening funnelwise into a mile-wide gorge through which the river, muddy and monstrous, rolled drunkenly. After the stagnant pools and holes which until then had supplied their needs, the sight of unlimited water was like entrance into Paradise. The beasts ploughed and wallowed. The men rolled and splashed and gulped.

A little apart, Harley sat upon a slab of rock with the map upon his knees, on which at the close of each day he had pricked out the course they had taken. Each halting-place was marked by a tiny asterisk and, in brackets beneath, a series of letters and numerals. Even to Ashrem, he had not confided the meaning of these entries; nor why every night when the camp was asleep he had gone out alone and buried in the sand a skin of water and a packet of 'Iron Emergency Rations' with the War Department stamp upon them. He had acquired the 'Iron Rations' at the coastal town. The residue of a quartermaster's stores mysteriously dumped at that destination during the war. Thus, from coast to where they now camped by the river-banks, with a day's march between each cache, a supply of food and drink enough for one man was hidden. In making these caches, Harley had responded to an instinctive caution.

With the exception of Ashrem, the natives who bore him company were not of the character to inspire confidence. Harley could readily imagine waking to find himself alone. His trust in human nature had had a setback as a result of what had happened in the near past. He had centred his mind on extracting from Fawlk a full confession in the presence of witnesses; and he did not mean to fail because he might be marooned and left to die.

Ashrem, to whom maps and compasses meant nothing at all — for Ashrem steered by the stars, by the earth's whispers and smells, by the feel of sand or rock or grass beneath his toes — came hastening along the river-bank at a loping run.

'Hamdu lillah!' he cried. 'I have found where they crossed the flood. We are less than a day's march behind.'

Harley rose, tucked away the map in its canvas case, and picked up his rifle. The impatience which had distinguished his actions in the earlier part of the pursuit had given way to an unhurrying resolution — a dogged, determined, unremitting preparedness. He had proved the value of walking five miles rather than running two. The lesson learnt at Naples, where he had overrun his quarry, was not forgotten. Time had ceased to be the ruling factor of the chase. Only constancy mattered.

At his own speed he accompanied Ashrem downstream.

'See,' said Ashrem.

During the last twenty-four hours the river had in some measure declined, leaving a fringe of crisping mud at the water's edge trampled by the feet of beasts and men. In the tangle of seals and prints made by camel pads, the dainty hoofs of mules, and the feet of native carriers, were the marks of a pair of European boots.

'The Man!' said Ashrem, and his fingers closed joyously about an imaginary throat.

Harley nodded.

The sight of those bootmarks, with their promise of nearness, started a pulse throbbing in his brain. The man he sought seemed to materialise in the gathering dusk — rising from the trampled ground, gaunt, hunched, cavern-eyed, and cynical.

Almost he could hear a voice saying, 'Surely it's *Trevelyan*. What can have brought you *here*?'

That odd stressing of single words and the islands of fat upon Fawlk's forehead pressed together like a baby's fists.

And Ashrem, watching the muscles of Harley's jaw tighten and relax and tighten again, whispered the promise, 'There is not long to wait.'

His arm scythed out towards the brow of a hill — ebony dark against the sky. 'To-night he will be camping in the ruins of a fortress, built when the Pharaohs were kings of Egypt and their power spread like the roots of jungle weed. It may be that he will stay there many days, for there is much game in that district and his bearers will be drunk with meat.' He stopped and smacked his lips. 'Should he have killed an elephant, our task will be easy, for who can fight if his belly be so full that he can only sleep? Moreover, the Man will be unready — since he knows not who follows and ——'

A hundred yards away, where Harley's natives were clustered by the river-bank, a flicker of flame crackled into a blaze and a wisp of smoke rose heavenward.

Ashrem's voice swelled to a sudden roar as he raced upstream. 'The fire — put out the fire, pigs and sons of pigs!'

As the startled natives beat with sticks at the faggots, a golden rain of sparks ascended and fell.

Ashrem stamped his bare feet upon the glowing ashes. Then, turning to Harley, he said, 'It is as though we had cried aloud to our enemy, Lo, we are here.'

2

Ten miles away, a solitary Englishman, amusing himself with the reflection that sunsets epitomised Nature's vulgarity, saw in the valley below that flash of fire that was so swiftly extinguished. Being of an inquiring nature, he wondered as to the cause of this phenomenon. For why, he asked himself, should anyone light a fire and put it out before it had burned long enough to heat a tin of shaving-water. It argued that whoever was responsible had private reasons to keep his presence dark. Turning the matter over in his mind, an improbable but unpleasant solution presented itself. In the war, when uncertain of what was happening on the other side, it was the fashion to instruct a party to creep across No Man's Land and find out. Although expensive, this method was often fruitful of the happiest results.

'Moolo,' said Evan Fawlk to his head man, 'you will take two of your best men and the three fastest mules and ——'

When Moolo returned some time later, he was grinning.

'Did you bring a prisoner?' Evan Fawlk demanded.

Still grinning, Moolo shook his woolly head.

Evan Fawlk began to swear slowly — choicely.

'There was no need, lord,' said Moolo. 'We found one sleeping apart from the rest and wrapped him in a blanket. Him we questioned with the point of a creese at the throat. So! There are twenty bearers and an Englishman called Tev'len.'

Evan Fawlk rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Trevelyan?' he repeated.

Moolo nodded.

'And the bearer — the man you questioned — you let him go?' The words were barked with nervous ferocity.

Moolo looked at his companions and giggled. All three giggled and nudged one another. It was waste of time to proceed along that line of inquiry. After all, Moolo was no fool.

'You may go,' said Evan Fawlk. 'But send a man to the river to keep watch.'

Afterward he sat nibbling his thumb-nail and thinking things over.

'How steadfast! how determined!' he thought. 'Evidently a man who cannot take a licking gracefully.'

Well! If he wanted more!

He stopped biting his thumb-nail and played with a button on his coat, for doubt and anxiety had given place to a curiously piquant sensation of satisfaction. Trevelyan should be given one more round by all means — and then — his *congé*.

One could not be bothered indefinitely with this kind of threat. Besides, one was in Africa.

Rising, he passed out of his tent and along the broken wall of mud and shale, the ashlars of the ancient fortress. Black masses of cloud rolling impetuously across the night sky were blotting out the stars. A glimmer of lightning flowed along the northern horizon and a wind startled from rest in the valley below whispered 'Hush, hush,' to a grumble of sullen thunder.

Where the wall angled was a tiny keep, the one part of the fortress still boasting a roof. Before its door lolled a Danakil warrior, huge, with spear in hand.

Fawlk nodded towards the door and the man lifted a drop bar that held it shut. A thick human smell ran out to meet him. Evan Fawlk flashed an electric torch. Its rays were reflected in the whites of three pairs of eyes and upon the links of a steel chain. The eyes dropped near and nearer to the floor as their owners grovelled.

Fawlk turned to the sentry. 'How many empty collars are there upon the chain?'

But the sentry had never instructed himself in the art of counting.

'Stand up — come out!' he ordered.

Three miserable Somali boys crept out, grunting and gasping at the amazement of fresh air. About their necks were steel collars fastened by spring locks. Five feet of chain separated each man from his fellow. Beyond the last, three empty collars, gaping wide for fresh victims, trailed clanking across the threshold.

'So many!' said Fawlk. 'Good! You shall have company to-morrow. White company.'

A river of lightning ran across the sky as the sentry dropped the wooden bar into place. The thunder roared and rain like metal rods drilled downward into the earth.

3

Ashrem awoke at the touch of Harley's hand upon his shoulder.

'Listen, Ashrem, a storm. We must make the crossing to-night. By morning the river will be in flood.'

In an instant Ashrem's whip was cracking the reveille.

Harley, who had spent much of his boyhood on the banks of the Wye, had early learnt to read the moods of a river. The paper-thin whispering wavelet, that ran mouselike over the flat mud on which he stood, was a sure token of the spate which, within an hour, would hurl itself through the gorge. The distant thunder was growing in volume as the storm approached, and the whole of the northern sky was aplay with lightnings. In the rare silences between thunder peals the beat of a mighty rain could be heard approaching.

The first of the camels was being urged into the stream when the forerunner of the spate came sweeping down in a tall wave.

'Back, get back! The heavens have opened!' cried a voice.

'On, get on!'

The whip cracked, a man screeched in pain. By the lightning flashes Harley saw some of the natives dragging their beasts back from the rising water. Others, fearful of consequences, had waded in breast deep and stopped, afraid to go farther. The water was flashing like jewels on their black skins. The mules were backing, kicking, squealing. Chaos ruled.

Casting off his coat, Harley seized a coil of rope and, making one end fast to a tree stump, he took the other end between his teeth and plunged in. The violence of the flood swept him downstream, but he held on grimly until beneath his feet he could feel the shifting bottom of the farther shore. A trailing liana held out its coils to meet him, and, seizing it, he hauled himself into safety. He paused to recover his breath, then raced upstream to where his men jabbered and huddled on the opposite bank. Anchoring the rope to a root, he shouted to them to seize it and follow. But, although he shouted again and again, no man obeyed. By the intermittent flashes he could see Ashrem pleading, exhorting, threatening, but men and beasts alike were drawing back from the flood which every moment grew in volume and impetuosity. Through the roar of thunder and rain he heard Ashrem's whip cracking like pistol shots against naked bodies.

A bolder spirit than the rest cried, 'Kill! Kill!'

Knives were out. Creeses!

Ashrem's rifle spoke twice. Human screams mingled with the scream of the wind. The whole body of the bearers bunched together, swayed irresolutely, then lurched forward, driving down on Ashrem. Harley saw him raise the rifle above his head, fling it into the thick of them, seize the rope, sever it with a knife and cast himself into the river.

As the cauliflower head swung round in an arc across the surface of spinning, churning water, stones and spears and curses were thrown after it. Two minutes later, Ashrem stood beside Harley, arms extended, hands knotted into fists, and his body steaming in the rain.

'We have made the crossing, but at what a price!' he said.

4

It was an hour before dawn when the man Evan Fawlk had sent to the river to keep watch presented himself, panting and dripping, at his master's tent.

'The white man and one other have crossed the river,' he said. 'They sleep now along the limb of a great tree by the water's edge. It would be easy ——'

Fawlk silenced him with a gesture.

'The rest?' he demanded.

The man grinned. 'Were afraid to cross. They have taken the beasts and the baggage and gone back.' He pointed east.

As Evan Fawlk made what arrangements were necessary, he reflected how generously Fate operated on his side. In France, London, Naples, and even here in Africa, difficulties vanished even before they had developed. An instrument had always been at hand. A piece of roof timber to jam a door, a jealous woman, the change of a port of call, a flood. Yes, everything worked in his favour. If he had needed proof of the justice of his cause, this combination of fortuitous events handsomely supplied it.

He did not bother to attend to the matter himself. He gave orders to Moolo and waited for them to be carried out. He was at breakfast when the party returned, clustered about two captives, whose wrists were bound together, and who walked with the points of spears resting persuasively between their shoulders. A runner preceded the party and announced that orders had been obeyed.

'Where is Moolo?' Fawlk demanded.

The runner raised one knee and made a suggestive jerking movement with both hands.

'The white man,' he said laconically, and added, 'The harelip killed Ali and broke the arm of another.'

Fawlk nodded grimly. In France the official report would have read, 'The operations were carried out with few casualties.'

'Let them wait at twenty paces until I have finished eating,' he said.

The party came to a halt at the appointed place. Evan Fawlk did not waste a glance upon the man he hated. There was plenty of time ahead and to ignore Trevelyan while he sipped his coffee, ate dry biscuits and marmalade, and brooded upon what he would do, afforded him a delightful sense of power.

Trevelyan had remained inactive while a junior officer had struck Fawlk in the face. More, he had, by his silence, condoned the offence. More, he had had the insolence to love successfully the one woman in the world Fawlk desired. And finally, rather than accept the consequences of these actions, he had committed the supreme folly of this pursuit.

'Let him wait,' thought Evan Fawlk. 'Let him wait.' He lit a cigarette and pretended to busy himself over a map.

After a while he extinguished the cigarette on the heel of his boot, folded the map meticulously, and laid a loaded revolver on the folding table.

'Bring the white man here.'

The order was repeated, and the thongs that bound Harley and Ashrem together were cut with the blade of a spear.

Evan Fawlk did not look up when Harley came forward and stood before him. Had he done so, he must have been disappointed, for there was nothing of the dejected captive in Harley's appearance; rather he seemed sure of himself — triumphant.

'So you wanted to see me, Trevelyan?'

It was characteristic of him to ask that kind of question and with carefully prepared satire score off the inevitable answer. But Harley said nothing.

'Yes — I guessed you might wish to see me, so I sent my men to bring you here.'

'At a waste of two lives. There was no need to bring me, Fawlk. I was coming.'

'Moolo and Ali,' Fawlk nodded. 'They were good men, but life is cheap in Africa, as you may discover, Trevelyan.'

Harley shrugged his shoulders. 'If you have the courage to prove it.'

Evan Fawlk flushed, and fingered the trigger of his revolver.

'Insubordination dies hard,' he said, 'but in the end discipline conquers it. I can promise you a taste of severer discipline than any you have met before.'

'Threats don't scare me,' said Harley, 'since there is no woman here to carry them out for you.'

Crooking his foot round a kit bag that lay beneath the table, he hauled it into the open and sat down.

From the half-circle of natives there rose an 'Ooo' of amazement at the insolence of the act.

Evan Fawlk came slowly to his feet, the revolver levelled at Harley's head.

'Stand up!' he ordered. 'Stand up, if you ever hope to stand again.'

Harley did not move. 'Must you show off even to this bunch of blacks? Are you such a child, Fawlk? Then listen to me. I haven't followed you across half the world to make a play for your conceit. You fool yourself into believing you are master of this show, but you're wrong. Presently you and I will go back to the coast together, and in the presence of witnesses — white witnesses — you're going to make a confession. That surprises you, but it's true. It's going to happen. You aren't man enough to put a bullet through me. If you were, it would have been you and not Paula

Drayton who set the trap that indirectly cost me the life of a friend and several other things I won't enumerate. No, you skulked in the background, as you always have and always will. Now, because you're out of reach of the law and have a band of rascally cutthroats to carry out your orders, you deceive yourself into believing you can do all sorts of dreadful things. Well, so you could, if you had the power and the guts to change your own nature and inoculate that yellow streak with a dash of crimson. But that is something that you can't do.'

'Go on,' said Evan Fawlk, licking his lips sweetly. 'Go on. It just needed this.'

'If there had been real stuff in you, you wouldn't have squealed about court-martials and witnesses when that boy David Drayton hit you in your dirty mouth. You wouldn't have grovelled under the table until he got clear. You'd have taken off your coat and settled it like a man. And you'd have settled with me like a man, instead of jamming that stable door and leaving the job to a more gentlemanly foe.'

Evan Fawlk started, and his brows went up. 'Who said — what do you mean — jammed ——?'

Harley laughed. 'Guesswork, and not far short of the mark. I have learnt to read your trademark on a job, even if I hadn't the wit to read it then. I'm indebted to you for a year in a prison camp and other things.'

Fawlk had relapsed into his folding chair. His eyes, fixed upon Harley through half-lowered lids, looked green in the early morning sunlight. Very slowly he said, 'You may come to look back on that year almost with affection, Trevelyan, for where you are going the years will gather like stones about your neck.'

'Rot!' said Harley. 'Bogy-man talk hurts no one. You and I are going back to the coast.'

Evan Fawlk shook out the map and pointed with his finger.

'Abyssinia,' he said sibilantly. 'Abyssinia, one of the last lands in this enlightened earth where men and women are still sold into slavery.' He stopped and laid his finger-tips together. 'Once — it was before the war, at Gatira — I saw a man — a white man — or something less, who was as you will presently become. He had been brought down from the massacre at Khartoum. He was old — so old — old enough to have outlived the memory of any time when there were not chains upon his wrists and ankles. When I saw him, his back was bent double and his beard swept the ground. His body was a single scar where the whips of his masters had taught him respect, courtesy, and obedience. We shall not need to travel so far as Gatira to find similar masters for you.'

In telling the story, he had employed exquisite emphasis and pause to give point to its horrors. At the close he leant back and smiled. To his surprise, Harley, too, was smiling — the smile of a man who refuses to believe.

'The same old game, Fawlk,' said he. 'Always another to do your dirty work. First the tribunal of a court-martial, then a woman, and now a woolly-headed nation of savages.'

'I bow to the better craftsman, Trevelyan, to the artist who knows his work.'

Harley shook his head. 'No, you take cover, that's all. Let me advise you, Fawlk. You've a gun there, use it, for' — suddenly he rose and pointed an accusing finger — 'unless you settle with me here and now, I swear before my Maker that you and I will return to the coast together, even if I carry you every yard of the way on my back.'

And, dropping his hands into his pockets, Harley walked from the table like a free man.

Evan Fawlk jerked up the pistol, covered him, and cried, 'If you don't stand before I count five ——'

'Start at five and shoot now,' came the answer.

But no shot was fired and Evan Fawlk allowed the pistol to drop slowly.

'No,' he said. 'You are clever, Trevelyan, to look for such an easy exit, but I prefer my way.' Then, raising his voice. 'Seize that man — have both of them collared to the chain.' He added, 'And afterwards, my children, there will be a feast.'

5

With characteristic European snobbishness, Harley removed himself as far as possible from the other captives on the chain. It had been possible in some measure to do so, since the last of the six collars had been fastened round his throat and between himself and Ashrem were ten feet of steel links and one empty collar. Harley lay with his mouth to the crack in the door, which afforded the only ventilation in that reeking prison-house.

Ashrem, silent, philosophical, sat on his hunkers in the centre of the floor, while the three Somalis lay mewing and scraping in one of the corners.

For the first few hours of captivity, the stench of the place had almost stunned Harley into insensibility. The steel collar was large enough to give his head free play, but the feel of it, and the knowledge that he was anchored indefinitely to four other human beings, was indescribably tormenting. The air was so lifeless that speech of any kind produced exhaustion. And yet, despite the horrors and discomforts of his predicament, Harley's spirits remained perversely high. He had reached his goal; not, it is true, in the manner intended, but the knowledge that he and Fawlk were now in touch transcended all other considerations. The confidence which had borne him company throughout the journey was unshaken. Although he had no clear vision of how his purpose was to be carried out, he was sure of his ability to find a way.

In the ray of light that penetrated through the crack in the door, he examined the chain and saw it was a steel forging — case-hardened and sound as a bell. Even with a hack-saw he doubted his ability to cut the links. Each section was fastened to staples riveted through the collars. But it was the collars that bore the most startling testimony of their aim at permanence. They were made of two halves hinged and fastened by a snap lock for which no keyhole was provided. Once the lock was shut, it was shut for good. The smith who had made them was no amateur.

Harley wiped the sweat from his brow and licked his lips. He had ceased to be an individual, but had become one of five men anchored together in adversity. From the nature of these gyves, it was clear that any attempt to escape must be carried on in consort with the rest.

From the corner where the three blacks lay huddled, the mewing and scraping grew louder and more incessant.

'Ashrem,' said Harley, speaking for the first time, 'what are they doing?'

Ashrem translated the question in a native dialect and received a whispered answer. 'A hole,' he said. 'They pick at the mortar with their nails to make a hole.'

Taking a long breath, Harley crawled over to inspect. Around the sides and base of a stone, the width of a man's shoulders, the industrious trio had scraped deep into the wall. Here and there, where the mortar had perished, they had delved in to the length of a man's hand. In one spot a pin-point of light showed beyond, which, acting like the lens of a camera, threw a picture of palm tops and sky upon the bare knee of one of the natives.

Harley kicked at the stone, but it did not budge.

'Ashrem,' he said, 'put your back against mine and line up these fellows to brace yourself against. That's the way — now, when I give the word, shove like hell.'

Grasping the idea, the natives spanned the floor with their feet against each other's backs. The last man had the soles of his feet and the palms of his hand pressed to the opposite wall.

With his back against Ashrem's and both feet pressed against the stone, Harley gave the word to shove. In the seconds that followed, the five prisoners shoved until their arteries nearly burst. It was the middle man who had the worst of the squeeze. He got it coming and going. As the stone shifted, he let go a screech which could have been heard for miles, but since screams issuing from that prison-house were no unusual event, the sentry did not disturb himself to inquire into the cause.

But the stone had moved and moved a great deal farther than Harley intended. Before he could relax the pressure, it had toppled outward from the wall. If Harley had not had the inspiration to bellow at the top of his voice and drown the sound of its fall, in all probability their work would have been wasted. But nothing more than the yell was heard, and the stone, falling into a mass of creepers, rolled solemnly and silently into the valley below.

In the hush that followed, a rush of pure air, refreshed by the night's rain, filled the prison, bringing with it fresh life and hope.

Flat on his chest, Harley wormed his head and shoulders through the gap and looked out. Beneath him the outer wall of the fortress fell some twelve feet into a network of brambly undergrowth. To the right was the broken parapet, and fifty yards distant the green canvas top of Fawlk's tent.

The hole they had made was in the extreme right corner of the little prison, and Harley reckoned that by working oneself outward on one's back and then straightening to a sitting posture, it would be possible to get an arm over the parapet and hang there until the next man wriggled through and secured a handhold. This order could be repeated until the last man was free. The success of the operation would depend upon the length of chain between each of the collars. At a guess it looked as if they might count on there being just enough to do it. If there were not enough, the consequences were liable to be unpleasant. In his own case, with ten feet of chain to juggle with, Harley's chances were pretty good. As first man through, he would be in a position to help the others. For that matter, he had chain enough to let himself down to the ground, but this did not obtain with the rest. It was clearly the better plan to go up rather than down.

Harley was measuring distances in his mind when a burst of shouting and singing broke out from somewhere perilously near. Bringing his head round, he saw, through a tapestry of palm leaves, not twenty yards distant, a number of Fawlk's bearers moving along a pathway below. They were carrying poles from which depended huge and grotesque masses of raw flesh. A breath of hot wind stirring among the trees brought to his nostrils the blood smell as of a slaughter-house. From the cell behind him into which the odour had penetrated came guttural 'Aahs' and the juicy sound of smacking lips. The three Somali boys had smelt blood and the meat lust was upon them. The sentry posted outside the door had smelt it, too, and, beating a tattoo upon his stomach, he broke into the 'Song of Plenty.'

Harley felt himself seized by the ankles and hauled back into the cell. 'Your coat, master, quick, your coat.'

Before he had time to realise why, Ashrem had stripped off Harley's coat and, winding it about the waist of the smallest of the Somali boys, he bent the creature double and thrust his apex into the gap where the stone had been.

'Stay there, dog, for if you move before night, you die by my hands.'

Then, turning to Harley, Ashrem explained. 'The master's coat is the same colour as the stone. If those below, hearing the sentry's song, had looked up ——'

There was no need to say more, and Ashrem directed his thoughts into pleasanter avenues.

'My children,' he chanted, 'by the mercy of Allah and the wisdom of this great lord and mighty hunter, to-night we shall go free.'

But the natives had smelt elephant meat and moaned because their bellies were empty, beside which freedom was of small account.

6

Throughout the afternoon and into the night there was singing and dancing and feasting in the camp of Evan Fawlk. Never since the journey started had there been such an orgy of meat as was now provided. Stuffed and comatose they slept and snored with gobbets of flesh strewn on the ground about them. It was an immortal feast. Even the sentry outside the prison-house dozed at his post, lolling against the door, puffing and blowing like a hippo from the weight of food with which he was encumbered.

At ten o'clock, Evan Fawlk made his rounds, pausing outside the prison door to wish Harley a good-night. To his surprise Harley returned the greeting with excellent good-humour.

'I trust you find the company in there agreeable, Trevelyan.'

'I find it preferable to some I shall have to put up with.'

Evan Fawlk said no more. He felt childishly hurt. The answer had pricked his pride. Hatred and rancour were to be expected from his captive, but schoolboy cheekiness was insufferable. After a day in that foul hole there was no excuse for a man's spirit still to run so high.

Lighting the lantern in his tent, he threw himself on the bed and tried to read, but the book — a treatise on contemporary French painters — failed to hold his attention.

What Harley had said that morning rankled bitterly. 'Always some one else to do your dirty work.' That was unjust, unappreciative, typical of the kind of man who settled disputes with two hands and no imagination. Surely imagination deserved its measure of praise. He thought how misunderstood, how underrated he had always been. It was true that natives stood in awe of him, but he could not recall a single white man who had ever paid him the tribute of being afraid. In the war he had broken many men and brought others to the pitch of mutiny; but in the war his commands had been supported and controlled by regulations and military law. What fear he had then inspired was fear of the machine he represented and not of himself as an individual.

And now that he had been given the opportunity to make a man afraid, he was already beginning to doubt his ability to bring it off. Standing critically apart and looking at himself as someone else, Evan Fawlk saw that before him lay the supreme test of character, the chance to prove whether he was the man he believed himself to be, or merely a shell as Harley Trevelyan had declared.

Rising on his elbow, he blew out the light and, tucking his revolver under his pillow, settled gloomily in the dark.

7

Fifty yards away a black head which protruded like a rivet from the wall was swiftly withdrawn. Its owner whispered, 'The light is out!'

'Tell them,' said Harley to Ashrem, 'we wait for an hour. No one is to move for an hour.'

A whicker of protest followed the translation of this order.

'Silence!' hissed Ashrem; 'would you wake the sentry?'

Outside the door a rhythmic rumbling told how the sentry, too, had waited for the light to be extinguished before abandoning himself to slumber.

The time dragged interminably before Harley rose to his feet and whispered 'Now.' There was no excuse for the folly of what followed. The order in which they were to go had been arranged hours before, but the natural distrust of the native mind overruled common-sense. No sooner had Harley given the signal than the last man on the chain dived for the hole, swivelled round, sat up, clutched at the parapet, missed his finger-hold, and toppled outward. The man next to him had the presence of mind to seize the chain and throw his weight back. There was a hideous, throttled cry and a sound like the breaking of a branch. The man clutching the chain was slowly dragged across the floor until he blocked the hole.

'Help, help!' he shrieked. 'Help! I cannot hold it!'

It was Ashrem who got a grip on the chain, winding it round his forearm and bracing his knees against the wall. Down below the feet of the hanged man were drumming against the wall.

Rudely awakened from his slumber, the sentry threw open the door and stumbled in. Blinded by the darkness, he paused, his enormous body silhouetted against the night sky, and in that moment Harley landed a smashing blow at his stomach. At any other time it is doubtful whether a single blow would have done the trick, but a stomach heavily loaded with uncooked elephant meat is in no fit state to resist violent impacts.

With a low groan the sentry sagged at the knees, and as he tottered forward, Harley got home with a right hook to the jaw which turned off the current at the main.

But there was no time to lose, and, joining the others on the chain, Harley lent his strength to the ghoulish task of dragging up the hanged man. Unless this were done, they were anchored indefinitely to the prison.

Sweating, tugging, and gasping, inch by inch the corpse was raised, but try as they would it could not be persuaded to come head foremost through the gap. A dozen times it was raised and lowered, but it seemed that no power on earth could hinge the body over from the vertical to the horizontal. The chain had cut a groove in the mortar and, as attempt succeeded attempt, only the head appeared with the shining steel collar circling a broken neck.

'Are we to be killed by a dead man!' cried Ashrem, and put forth all his strength.

For two seconds he and the rest hauled and slugged and jerked, and the next they were lying in a heap on the floor with a length of broken chain coiled like a snake over the tangle of fallen bodies. The riveted staple at the collar had drawn. They were free.

There was little risk of interference as Harley led his chain gang under the lee of the broken wall towards the tent. Fawlk's bearers had eaten their fill and slept like logs. Bidding the Somali boys to wait outside, Harley and Ashrem crawled through the tent flap on hands and knees. The shape of the man on the bed was dimly visible. Chin up, he lay, his thrawn, stringy neck craning out of the blanket.

Harley wormed his way to the back of the bed and paused. Something in his hands squeaked like a mouse as he manipulated it.

'What's that. Who's ——?'

The voice that came out of the darkness was stifled into silence as a huge brown hand clapped over its owner's mouth. Followed an upheaval of bedclothes — a flailing of arms — the dull shine of a revolver spinning through the air and the click of a spring lock as the collar shut.

After his first struggle, Evan Fawlk offered no further resistance. He could not speak, for Ashrem had stuffed a sock into his mouth. Harley Trevelyan, who had recovered the revolver from the floor, pressed the muzzle against his knee-cap. Sick with fear, Fawlk sat motionless, while Ashrem fastened his arms to his sides with a strap from a gripsack.

'His boots,' said Harley, 'and hat. And look around for any foodstuff you can find, and a water bottle.'

While these orders were being obeyed, Harley offered advice.

'We are making for the coast, Fawlk. Chained together like this, our chances of getting there are not good, but we are going to try, and you must help. As long as there is a possibility of success, you are in no danger. Indeed, I mean to look after you, Fawlk, like a child. But, understand, you take your orders from me. In the journey before us you are going to learn more discipline than you've ever dreamt of. Get up. March.'

Star-shine was reflected on the steel collars and the links of the chain as the little party jingled across the open space and vanished along the jungle path that led to the river.

8

'Mad!' said the Baron. 'Impossible! For a girl like you, what you suggest can't be done.'

Joan's hands were crammed into the pockets of her linen jacket, her feet were planted firmly on the ground, and her chin was out.

'But I'm not a girl like me, and nothing is impossible if one means to do it.'

'Now, listen, Joan. It'll take five days in a steamer to reach Tajura. Heaven knows how long to fit out an expedition, and after that some of the vilest country in Africa lies before you.'

Joan looked at him in pity.

'You talk,' she said, 'as if difficulties mattered, as if I didn't welcome them. Oh, you stupid, blind man, haven't I earned a bad time? Didn't I let my faith in him be shaken when he needed it most? Don't you realise that he could have cleared himself easily if he hadn't — I know I'm talking like a story-book — hadn't been too chivalrous?'

'Miss Drayton, you mean?'

Joan nodded.

'But, my dear child,' he said, 'the poor creature cleared his name, wrote to the papers, and everybody before she died.'

'But Harley didn't know that — doesn't know. How could he possibly guess that she meant to do it? You might as well expect him to know that her body had been picked up at some crossroads in France with an empty veronal bottle beside it. Don't you see that he isn't the kind of man who would ever clear himself at the expense of a woman?'

The Baron shook his head. 'You may be right, but in my opinion he behaved like a sad fool.'

'But, of course!' cried Joan wildly. 'What else do you expect? Lovers *do* behave like fools — they must — it's part of the contract. You're not so old that you can't remember that.'

The Baron stared at the butt of a cold cigar and smiled reminiscently.

'There's a good deal of truth in that,' he said. 'Once, when I was courting your mother, I walked to Eastbourne and back to see her. One hundred and twenty-four miles it was, and I've had flat feet ever since.'

'And why did you do it?'

He shrugged his shoulder. 'I don't know — a *beau geste* — a crusade. I could easily have taken the train.'

'Angel,' said Joan, slipping an arm round his neck, 'I knew you'd worn armour and only wanted reminding. The steamer sails at noon on Saturday. I'll give you until then to get everything ready.'

The modern father does not, as a rule, excite a lavish expenditure of admiration from his offspring. More usually he is regarded as an amiable sort of fool who, for some reason, unfathomable by the members of his family, contrives to provide the necessaries of life.

But the Baron proved an exception to this rule. What he managed to do in the very little time given him to do it in was remarkable. The idea of sending his daughter into the heart of Ethiopia in company with a party of native bearers he rejected with an absoluteness of which she had not expected him capable.

'You go my way or not at all,' he said.

It is incontestable that his way proved more to her liking and was a hundred per cent more efficient.

On the night that Harley and the other captives broke from the prison-house there were landed, at a little African port south of the Somali country, two stocky-looking motor-cars, which, to the astonishment of the natives, proceeded along the quay upon moving rubber tracks instead of wheels. Behind each car was a trailer packed with camp equipment, petrol tins, rifles, and even a machine gun.

Besides Joan, the party consisted of four hard-bitten youngsters and an elderly man with a face like a shunting yard. The quartette was blue-eyed, squarejawed, and altogether rather alarming. Each of them had fallen in love with Joan at first sight and had secretly determined to outclass his fellows in valour, efficiency, and resource.

The Baron had pulled them in off his various plantations, where they had been languishing in wretchedness after the gaieties of war. His instructions in regard to safeguarding his daughter had been brief, cogent, but quite unnecessary.

The senior man, who was O.C. party, had been a game warden in various parts of Africa, which continent he knew as intimately as the back of his hand. His name was Edward Lille, but he was addressed as 'Chief.' He rarely talked if pointing would do instead. He seemed to possess eyes in the back of his head, but what they saw was never revealed in the expression of his face, which was permanently inscrutable. He neither smoked nor drank, nor indulged in any amusement or anodyne provided by civilisation for the greater comfort of mankind. Unless driven by necessity he never ate anything that he did not pick growing or shoot wild.

The expedition, complete so far as human imagination could make it, lingered no longer in the coastal town than was needed to ascertain which direction Harley's party had taken. Screened by a rising plume of reddish-coloured dust, it wallowed through the belt of tamarisk and acacia beyond the mud walls and entered into a silent, salt-smeared country bereft of vegetation and animal life, and dedicated, one could imagine, to the perpetuation of drought, desolation, and sterility.

It was Joan's first experience of anything so vast, and it smote her with sensations of doubt and despair.

She tried hard to prevent putting her fears into words but they were jolted out of her.

'Chief, do you think — I mean, is one ever going to find anybody in a place like this?'

His reply was characteristic and enormously comforting. He pointed at the heavens.

'Oh,' said Joan, 'then of course we shall.'

9

When the gag was removed from Evan Fawlk's mouth and his arms freed, he gripped the steel collar and screamed like a hare. Harley made no effort to control or prevent him. Those grim, unremovable collars were cause enough for hysteria. Had his purpose been a shade less resolute, his own voice might have shrilled to the alto of panic and mingled with Fawlk's.

It was impossible to imagine a more hopeless situation than the one in which they were cast. From where they stood to the coast stretched seven hundred miles of jungle and desert. Save for a revolver loaded in six chambers, they were unarmed, for they had not risked raiding the camp for equipment. From Fawlk's tent Ashrem had collected food enough to last three days, and a single water bottle. For the rest there was nothing to rely upon but the caches of 'Iron Rations' left by Harley on the outward journey.

In face of such a prospect the stoutest optimism was liable to crumble. Envisaging the horrors of his predicament, Evan Fawlk screamed and screamed again. He had no hope in doing so that his bearers would hear and come to his rescue. He knew their character well enough to realise that, once free of his rule, they would loot the camp, divide the booty, and disperse.

So he screamed to relieve the pressure of his terror and, drawing breath to scream anew, he heard the two Somali boys chuckling and clapping their hands. To them, at least, his screams afforded rare pleasure, for was he not responsible for their plight, and was it not a most exquisite retribution that he should now be suffering the same restraint he had imposed upon them? Oh, it was rich — rich.

'Ouah!' they laughed, and rolled on the ground in ecstasy.

Evan Fawlk shut his teeth and stiffened.

With a voice that trembled, in spite of his effort to control it, he said, 'I'm sorry, Trevelyan; I have done myself less than credit in the presence of inferiors.'

Harley shrugged his shoulders. 'Time'll prove which of us are inferior.'

Evan Fawlk checked an angry retort. 'We must have discipline,' he said. 'If you'll give me another yard of chain, I'll kick some manners into those black dogs.'

'You won't,' said Harley, 'unless you want to be strangled in the night.'

Evan Fawlk sat down jerkily and wiped his lips. The panic in his eyes was gathering again. 'It's terrible — terrible! Yes, yes, you're right,' he muttered, 'they'll try to kill me — bound to. It was I who put them upon the chain. We are like a string of beads — there's no escape from one another.' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'Listen — it wouldn't suit you to have me killed.'

'I'll look after you.'

'You won't be able. I know the native mind. They'll wait and wait and choose a moment to strike when the blow is least expected.'

'As you waited,' said Harley.

Fawlk brushed the interruption aside. 'You've my pistol — use it. Two shots would settle the business.'

'You must do your own murders, Fawlk.'

'No, no. Your hand is steadier than mine. It is madness to refuse.'

Harley touched the steel collars significantly.

'Do you want to add the burden of two corpses to our load?'

'There'd be no need. They could be disposed of. It wouldn't be pleasant, but — your man here ——'

For the first time Ashrem spoke in the manner of Montagu Square. 'Sir, I have the superior honours to hold a law degree, yass! — in the University of London. Please remember that — thanks — before you ask me to do your dirty business. Yass!'

This unexpected flow of English from the cauliflower head so startled Fawlk that he scrambled to his feet, whimpering. 'Why didn't you tell me he understood?'

Harley gave a raw laugh. 'He understood more than your words, Fawlk. Get this into your head: from now onward we depend upon ourselves, not each other. Come on, and brace up! We are going to cross the river to-night.'

But the Fates which had so far protected Evan Fawlk did not forsake him even in the present emergency.

The river had subsided during the day, but it still ran high enough to make the ford a pretty strenuous business. Harley and Fawlk had reached the farther shore and Ashrem was already scrambling up the bank when a swirl and a shriek came from the water below. The Somali boy at the end of the party leapt high, seized a root with his right hand, and snatched at the chain with his left. Simultaneously Ashrem was dragged back by an invisible force. The last man but one on the chain had disappeared and from the water rose a heavy smell of musk. Then lashings, a moment of chaos, yells and gurgles, and presently Ashrem and the Somali boy were scrambling up the bank dragging something between them that was not good to look upon. An eighteen-foot crocodile cruised contentedly downstream.

The river had taken its toll.

Later, Evan Fawlk lay face downward in the long grass. His thumbs were pressed into his ears and he was very sick indeed. A few feet away someone was chopping regularly with a stone.

10

Across an elliptical basin half-filled by a lake of blue water and margined by sheets of glittering, snow-white salt, two men dragged themselves wearily. The mirage which surrounded them washed like waves against a battlement of sullen, hot-looking mountains. From the sun overhead polished spears of light stabbed earthward.

Harley was silent — wasting none of the power left to him in speech, but Evan Fawlk babbled incessantly. He had been given his noonday drink and the water had relaxed his tongue.

'Boots,' he said, as though inspired. 'We must stop and buy boots. I have mine made for me by Robbs in Sloane Street. Mention my name if you go there. Evan Fawlk. They'll be delighted.'

For a moment he was silent, watching, through the broken leather of his boots, raw bare toes swinging mechanically into and out of his sight. His hand went to his throat and strained at the steel collar.

'Ashrem, Ashrem! Take the weight of the chain, can't you? Take the weight of the chain, I said.' He stopped, looked round, and asked in bewilderment. 'Where is he — that man?'

'Dead. Only we two are left.'

Evan Fawlk was dissatisfied. 'Dead? Surely not — more likely shirking. How did he die?'

'Snake-bite.'

Evan Fawlk tittered foolishly and pointed at the empty collars that clanked over the scoria behind them.

'But there were others. Surely there were others? How?'

Harley said nothing.

'I remember,' Fawlk nodded. 'At the ford, was it not? And then in the jungle. Wasn't it a lion? Yes, and the rest of us lay along a bough. Why didn't you shoot the lion? But you'd thrown away the pistol. Why did you throw it away.'

'One must sleep sometimes,' came the answer.

Evan Fawlk had forgotten how night after night he had tried to possess himself of the revolver. The sun had helped him to forget many things. He had forgotten his companion's name and his hatred. Of late he had come to regard Harley with feelings akin to tenderness. That clever way he had of digging up food and water from the sand was most endearing. Of course, it was strictly contrary to Army Regulations to open Iron Rations except in cases of extreme emergency. Later on he, Fawlk, would have to put in a report about that to H.Q. Someone would be for the mat. He had warned Harley, but he couldn't help liking him, although it was absurd to carry a friendship to the extent of linking themselves together with a chain.

His wandering thoughts reverted to the Somali boys. 'Curious — curious!' he said. 'I intended to kill them, but was saved the trouble. I think I must be a darling of the gods? Anyone who sets himself against me goes down. There was a boy in France — had the audacity to strike me. Ten minutes later, he was killed by a shell. It was a judgment.'

Harley said nothing — with difficulty.

'Countless instances I could give you. There was a man — you remind me of him — I hated and was waiting for — to break. A woman stepped in and did it for me. Broke his heart. Yes.'

'Fawlk,' said Harley, 'that's a good story. You mustn't forget it.'

'I shan't — I shan't.' Even a little admiration encouraged him enormously.

'When we reach the coast you should tell it to the first white man we meet.'

'Yes, yes. That's a good idea. How long before we reach the coast?'

Harley scarcely trusted himself to reply. Their destination was so immeasurably remote. 'A month, perhaps.'

It was three weeks since they had crossed the river and the worst of the journey was still ahead. By exerting every ounce of energy and persuasion he could command, their daily speed of travel had never been more than half the distances covered on the outward journey.

The death of Ashrem and the Somali boy had been a mercy in disguise, for the one-man rations Harley had buried made a poor sharing among four, and it had never taken them less than two days to move from one cache to the next. At every issue there had been blows — shrieks — grabbings — throttlings. But for a few special providences they would never have survived so long. The carcase of an antelope disputed with vultures, and other lesser things, caught and eaten raw. But from now onward they could look for nothing extra in a wilderness as destitute of life as the dried-up bed of an ocean.

'Oh, come!' babbled Evan Fawlk, 'then we shall arrive to-morrow. That's capital.'

'A month — a month,' Harley repeated, for the fear of his companion going mad was not the least of his terrors.

'Suppose,' he thought, 'I succeed in bringing him to the coast and he is mad — who will believe?'

All this horror would have been for nothing. Better to die out there and never return. Sometimes he had trembled for his own sanity: doubted whether determination and a fixed purpose would supply the power to keep a grip upon his slipping senses. His one hope lay in directing his thoughts weeks ahead or far behind. In the near past and present; in that jangling chain with its ghastly reminders of tragedy and beastliness; in the piercing arrows of the sun; in sand and lava — hunger, thirst, and desolation — lay the elements of madness. Once each day he looked at Joan's picture in the cigarette-case. Joan was reserved as a special luxury — an impetus. He would take an hour or two they had spent together and review every word and detail of it minutely. He never allowed these thoughts of her to overlap from the moments they were focussed upon into any other period. The realisation of how little of his life had been spent with Joan came as a shock to him. Because of this shortage, he schooled himself to be very chary with the Joan memories and to expend them as jealously as he rationed out their miserable supplies of food and water.

Never once did he allow himself to speculate on her present thoughts of him. He lacked the courage — was too parched — too starved in body and mind — to endure the idea that she might be thinking of him with bitterness and resentment. He cheated himself with the belief that she and every friend he had ever had were sending out waves of love and kindliness to help him to realise the impossible task he had set himself.

And into these false conceits would come Evan Fawlk's voice, croaking about this man he had broken. 'Turned out of his clubs, and the girl he was in love with dropped him like a stone.'

At such a time the desire to choke the life out of his companion was almost insurmountable.

'You've got to live!' he cried aloud; 'to live, to live!'

And Evan Fawlk would nod and smile and think what a capital fellow this was who dug up food from the earth and looked after him with the tenderness of a woman.

'One day,' he promised, 'you shall be best man at my wedding. But first I must remember your name — what is your name?'

Harley shook his head.

Evan Fawlk said: 'When you shake your head bits of sunlight flash off it like steel filings. I can hear them tinkle as they reach the ground. But perhaps it isn't sunlight — perhaps it's a halo falling to bits.'

He stopped and laughed. 'But you aren't an angel — you may be a devil for all I know.' Then a strangled protest: 'Walk slower, man, you're throttling me.'

II

A caravan of mules and camels emerging from the gut of a narrow gorge halted in amazement at the spectacle of two grey snorting monsters lumbering towards them over the plain. The impulse of the natives in charge of the caravan was to turn and run, but the monsters were upon them too soon, and a white man, whose face was seamed with a million wrinkles, had grabbed the leading camel-driver by the ear and was putting to him some pointed and uncomfortable questions.

By Allah's grace lying was one of this native's few accomplishments. Moreover, the lie had been carefully prepared and was waiting in pickle to be published. He delivered it fluently and with enough detail to have convinced anyone who was not familiar with the workings of the Danakil mind.

It was a tragic tale of a man who had died of fever surrounded by loving and attentive bearers. All that human care could do had been done. Water poured over, the most sacred passages of the Koran had been administered, heedless of the provision which reserves this sovereign remedy for the monopoly of Sultans. In a hopeless attempt to save the life of their dearly loved lord, a mule had been slain and its teeth roasted. Indeed and indeed, no effort had been spared, but alas! without avail.

The scepticism with which this recital was received shocked the native's sense of propriety to the length of encouraging him to draw his creese. This course was instantly followed by the rest of his comrades. The white man, however, showed no disposition to retreat. Instead, he held up one arm and crooked his forefinger, whereat a machine gun perched on the back seat of one of the monsters chopped up a frame of sand and rock chips round the caravan.

In the confusion that followed, a fresh hold was taken of the native's ear and the question was repeated.

'If the white man is dead — you murdered him?' said the Chief.

The native grovelled. As Allah was his judge, it was not so. And, drawing breath, he embarked upon a fresh recital that bore no likeness to its predecessor.

'Well?' said Joan, for among the baggage borne by one of the camels she had read the initials H. T. on a kit bag.

The Chief's courage was not of the kind that shirked a responsibility, however unpleasant and brutal, but he did not meet her eyes as he pointed sombrely at the ground.

Joan passed the tip of her tongue over her lips. 'I see,' she said.

Three of the blue-eyed quartette ranged up beside her. The fourth remained at his post by the machine gun. But he was near enough to have grasped the significance of the Chief's gesture. In the bosoms of all four awoke a determination to make it up to Joan in sundry ways. He may have been a good fellow who had died out there in the desert, but for a girl so game, so gallant, so lovely, he cannot have been good enough.

The Chief slipped one of his dry, hard hands into Joan's.

'But we shouldn't forget all natives are liars,' he said.

Joan's cheeks blazed red and into her eyes came an expression so terrifying and uncivilised that the natives recoiled before it. She said, 'Find a way of making them tell the truth.'

Her meaning was unmistakable, and as she spoke her fingers tightened so that her nails bedded deep into the back of the Chief's hand.

He shook his head. 'The truth isn't in them.'

One of the young men wiped his forehead, for he had discovered the startling fact that woman is an unknown quantity.

'Gosh, she must have loved him!' he thought. 'She'd have tortured those beggars.'

The inquisitor in Joan died stillborn. Her hand trailed out towards the kit bag.

'I'd like to have it — there may be something there — that I gave him.'

The bag was dumped in the back of one of the cars, and mechanically she climbed in and began to sort the odds and ends that it contained.

Suddenly her voice rose imperatively. 'What are we waiting for? Why aren't we getting on?'

'But, Miss Joan ——' the Chief began.

'Get on — get on!' she repeated.

The Chief sought the eyes of the quartette and shrugged his shoulders.

12

'Give me that.' The words sounded more like a snarl than human speech.

Harley swung round defensively. The cigarette-case in his left hand, shutting with a snap, hid Joan's picture from view.

A beast ready to spring, Evan Fawlk crouched with his nails digging into the sand. 'Give me that.'

Harley recoiled a pace drawing the chain that divided them tense. The dreaded moment had come.

Evan Fawlk's lips were drawn back over his teeth. A dribble of saliva coursed down the side of his mouth. One of his hands went out like a claw.

'That picture — give it to me — it's mine.'

Stealthily he crept a foot nearer.

Within Harley's brain ghoulish voices chorused, 'Kill him! Kill him!'

He struggled to silence them, stepping back to keep distance, and crying aloud, 'He's got to live — to live! Don't let me kill him! Joan — Joan!'

The cry rang and echoed across the baked and tortured lava.

'Joan! Joan!'

The flanking hills heard and flung the name back to him. Fawlk heard, understood, and the madness in his eyes was replaced by a sanity even more hideous to look upon.

'You're Trevelyan,' he said, pointed accusingly, rose to his feet, came on, stopped to laugh, and came on again.

The chain stretched tightly between them, caught the rays of the falling sun, and became a bar of burning metal.

United, but out of reach, the one came forward as the other backed. Round and round in a huge circle they went, watchful, vigilant.

All the while Fawlk talked, dreadful, disjointed fragments of speech.

'The coast — to clear your name — not while I live! You're going to die, Trevelyan, without witnesses. Stand still! No use prolonging the end! Wait for me!

Tired of the chain, Trevelyan? I'll free you from it — only wait.'

'Kill him now!' croaked the voices.

'No!' yelled Harley in terror — but it was of himself he was afraid.

'Free you from it — with this!'

Dipping, Fawlk snatched at a heavy stone. But the stone was anchored to the iron-bound earth. With a savage roar he gripped it with both hands and wrenched madly. A greenish-brown, lobster-like creature, startled from its resting-place, threw up its tail and struck at his wrist.

The sudden pain of that poisoned stiletto gave Fawlk new strength. Harley stepped sideways, but too late. The heavy stone struck the side of his head and shut out the light. As his consciousness faded, he heard a voice roaring triumphantly. But he did not feel the fingers that plucked and fumbled to find a hold beneath the collar that circled his throat, and he did not hear a procession of agonised screams which rang out like a carillon in the gathering dusk.

The stars shone and a sickle moon hung low in the sky when his senses returned. A feeling of peace invaded his mind and body. A few feet away a man was sleeping with his face buried in his arms. It was folly to sleep with the end of their journey almost in sight.

'Let's get on, old man,' said Harley.

But the sleeper did not move.

'Poor chap — tired,' he thought. 'Perhaps I could carry him for a bit.'

The sleeper made no effort to help, but somehow Harley raised and bore him upon his shoulders.

'Do the same for me, I shouldn't wonder,' he thought, and stumbled slowly onward, unconscious of the weight of his burden.

Ever so far ahead, a flicker of light danced on the horizon.

'Something to steer by,' he thought. '"A kindly light."'

There was a song about a kindly light — or was it a hymn? Croakingly he tried a few bars, but the words and notes were mislaid with other things in a dulling memory.

But it was pleasant to sing in the night under the stars — pleasant and companionable.

'It's a long way to Tipperary.'

Yes, he remembered that one.

'It's a long way to go.'

A long way to go — way to go.

The words faded, but the light was nearer.

Must be a fire — a camp-fire; or perhaps a Véry light fizzling out on the grass; or a burning Zeppelin, a sheet of flame tottering across the sky and wrapping in fire a girl who stood beside him on a London roof.

Of course. That was it. The world was at war and he'd forgotten.

He stumbled on desperately.

13

A young man seated on an oil drum polishing the stock of his rifle with a greasy hand heard an uncertain voice singing in the wilderness. It so happened that his mind was occupied with romantic reflections, in consequence of which the intrusion of incidental music was at once welcome and appropriate. To this may be attributed the fact that he forbore from his usual practice of shooting first and asking afterwards, but rose to his feet, and exclaimed in astonishment, 'What the hell?'

He repeated the question, with added fervour, as, into the circle of light shed by the camp-fire, tottered a ragged and unshaven man who bore upon his shoulders something that looked like a limp sack.

Behind this apparition jingled a long chain with three empty collars.

Before the young man had time to embroider his initial inquiry, the intruder lowered his burden to the ground, straightened, and asked peremptorily, 'What company do you belong to?'

'I don't know what you'd call it, old boy,' was the inspired retort, 'but it's known to us as Joan Miller's Own.'

At that the unshaven man covered his eyes, moaned, and threw himself down upon the ground, for he knew beyond hope of contradiction that he was mad — mad.

14

'Shall I wake her, Chief?'

Edward Lille shook his head.

'Not till we're sure. She hasn't slept for ——' He held up three fingers.

Like a cat he followed the youngster to where Harley was lying. A few feet away sprawled another figure — lifelessly. A chain coiled between and beyond them.

Going down on his knees, the Chief raised Harley's head and held a flask to his lips. 'Drink, old chap.'

Mechanically Harley obeyed.

The diluted brandy buzzed in his brain like flies — awakening a host of memories. With a little cry he sat up and stared about him. His eyes coming to rest on the sprawling figure lost their terror in relief.

'That all ri' — 'fraid — lost him.'

'Yer friend is here.'

Harley echoed the word 'friend' with a puzzled inflection. Then, 'Friend — hardly.' And shook his head.

From a billy on the fire the youngster had produced a cup of soup. Harley sipped it, nodded gratefully, gulped down what was left, and held out the cup for more.

'Let that settle first,' said the Chief, and stooped beside Fawlk.

'No — no, don't wake him — not yet. Tried kill me once to-day — I'm too tired ——'

'All right, old chap, all right. Now, d'you feel well enough to tell us your name?'

'Give me a minute,' said Harley, and was silent for more than a minute.

'My name — no — leave that to him.' He pointed at Fawlk, and then took his head in both hands. 'Sane enough to keep that back until he's spoken. Have no name until he's spoken.'

The Chief nodded encouragingly. 'As ye wish.'

Behind cover of his own back, he reached out for Fawlk's wrist and felt for the pulse. But Evan Fawlk was dead.

The Chief caught the youngster's eyes. 'Get a file and a hack-saw.'

Before the youngster could move, Harley gripped him by the ankle.

'No — no. Not until he's spoken. Chained together until he's spoken. I'll kill any man ——' The hysteria died, and he held up a hand in a gesture of apology. 'Sorry, but you can't understand.'

'Listen, boy,' said the Chief; 'whoever it is that's lying here will never speak again. He's dead.'

With a strength no one could have suspected, Harley threw the Chief on one side and flung himself down beside Fawlk. Seizing the body by the shoulders, he rolled it over and stared into the dead face. The lips were drawn back in a cold grin. In the glazed eyes, with their drooping lids, the starlight was reflected dully. For one minute the living and the dead stared at one another in mingled hatred and satire.

'Evan Fawlk — Evan Fawlk!' Harley's voice had risen to a scream. 'Damn you, speak!'

Far away across the desert a hyena, hearing that cry, *ki-aied* derisively.

Harley came slowly to his feet. 'His black soul laughing at me,' he said. 'A darling of the gods he called himself. He wins.' With a prodigious effort he controlled the remnant of his senses. 'If you'll cut the chain, gentlemen, I'll be getting on.'

He did not hear the patter of footsteps behind him, but he saw the Chief whip off his coat and throw it over the grinning face that lay upon the ground. Also he heard the words, 'If ye'd get back to yer tent, Miss Joan, we'll have this young man of yours polished up and shaved before we bring him along.'

'You — you — you'll do a lot!' said Joan, which was all she could say.

But for the second time that night the Chief was flung rudely on one side to make way for more important operations.

15

'Stand firm,' said Joan, for she scorned to use the ladder. 'Right you are.'

Harley felt her feet braced against his chest and a moment later watched them tread the air as she vanished through an oblong of night sky in the ceiling above.

'Now sling up the sardines and the loaf.'

Up went the supplies. One, two. Joan caught them dexterously.

The butter was in Harley's pocket. A tin of steaming cocoa was hoisted upon a string.

'That the lot? Good. Then take wings, my angel.'

As he had done three years before, Harley balanced himself perilously on the bannister rail and jumped.

With the passing of war, its excursions and alarms, the bright stars that shone upon the city of London had dimmed before the effulgence of a thousand arc standards, illuminated signs, and a million glowing windows. No longer did the searchlights fret the heavens with pools and rods of light, nor did the shrapnel flash and twinkle over the Surrey Hills. The clamour of 'Toddy's lot' in Green Park was silenced, and there came up to them only the innocent rumble of traffic and the murmurous voices of a great city. Looking towards the glow that rose from Piccadilly, they stood hand in hand — thoughtful — even a little sad. The preparations for their midnight feast lay neglected by a chimney stack: an uncut loaf, unopened sardines, a tin of cooling cocoa.

'We found each other up here, Joan,' he said.

She nodded.

'We've found and lost each other for three years and now we've found each other for keeps.'

Then another, longer silence, broken by a moist little sound in Joan's small handkerchief.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Would it be very awful of me to cry a bit? I was thinking of Freddie, and mother standing on the bath, and your roses — Victoria Station and Amiens — and dreadful days and wonderful days and ever so much left for ever behind.'

Harley sniffed, too. 'I know,' he said.

'And now we're going to be married,' she said; and really cried at that.

'Joan, darling, what's the matter?'

'Nothing, angel — not even the littlest thing; but this is the first time, almost since I can remember, that one can dare safely to believe in happiness. It is rather frightening.'

He put his arms round her shoulders and held her tight.

'You're very comforting,' she said, 'and I'm being a most awful mutt. Before I pull myself together, d'you mind if I'm a little muttisher still?'

'Go ahead.'

'Well, it's an idea, and you may hate it, but I'm serious. This is peace, isn't it?'

'Supposed to be.'

'Harley, darling, let's make it a real peace. Thousands of people don't seem to be able to manage it, but I want us to try.'

He shook his head perplexedly. 'I'm being dense, sweetheart.'

'I mean —— Well — look at the papers. It's all excitement — still excitement — restlessness — nerves. The world hasn't settled down. Husbands and wives — and I'm certain lots of 'em still love each other awfully — fighting to get into the divorce court, throwing each other away all day long. Old men and old girls kicking up their heels and behaving anyhow.'

'Well?' he asked.

'Oh, Harley, darling angel, don't you see I want to settle down! I want to be absolutely stunned and saturated by peace. I want you and a home and some sons, and p'r'aps one daughter — if she isn't too big a fool — and very serious talks about education, and punctual meals, and the kind of house that's called "The Larches," and servants who call me "Yess'm" instead of "Medam," and roast beef on Sundays, and a tennis court, and a prayer-book, and a library subscription, and, oh, such heaps of love!'

'Whatever you want,' said Harley, and searched America for proper emphasis, 'is jake with me.'

'Only one more wish,' said Joan, 'and I've done.'

'It's yours, darling, before you've asked it.'

'Well, we used to talk about Thibet or Kamchatka or some outlandish place for a honeymoon.'

'Well?'

'Let's drop it, Harley, and go to Bognor instead.'

'Oh, my darling,' he whispered, and took her in his arms. 'I was going to suggest it.

'Idiot!' said she, kissed him shamelessly, grabbed his hand, and tugged.

'Come on, I'm ravenous.'

FINIS

Boston Public Library
3 9999 10502 690 8

ROLAND PERTWEE

like Aubrey Beardsley, was born in Brighton — the Atlantic City of England — and like Beardsley began his career as an artist before turning to literature. He served an apprenticeship under John Singer Sargent and Alma-Tadema, and later gave up art for the stage, where his talent for portraiture, coupled with a taste for mimicry, brought him success in a number of character parts played under the management of H. B. Irving.

'I had always written,' says Pertwee, 'but until the war I wrote for my own amusement. With the war and enlistment I attacked writing seriously and scribbled away in every conceivable corner of France.' Short stories came first, and in 1918 his first novel, 'Our Wonderful Selves,' was written in a convalescent hospital. Roland Pertwee won thousands of American readers by his sparkling adventure stories, 'Rivers to Cross' and 'Gentlemen March,' and by his thrilling tale of mystery, 'Interference,' which was equally successful as a novel and as a play. In 'Fish Are Such Liars!' he shows himself quite at home in the field of humorous essays.

Says the *New York Times:* 'If you have a dinner engagement to keep, don't begin a novel by Roland Pertwee!'

MYSTERY AND ADVENTURE

CASTLE GAY

By John Buchan

THE MYSTERIOUS MISS MORRISOT

By Valentine Williams

MURDER ON THE SALEM ROAD

By Katharine Metcalf Roof

THE SPLENDID CRIME

By George Goodchild

THE SECRET OF THE CREEK

By Victor Bridges

SAINT UDO

By Richard L. Masten

THE RED MESABI

By George Ryland Bailey

THE KING'S MINION

By Rafael Sabatini

PURSUIT

By Roland Pertwee

SEAWORTHY

By Captain Aylward E. Dingle

THE THRILL OF EVIL

By H. Ashton-Wolfe

THE REDHEAD FROM SUN DOG

By W. C. Tuttle

SALUTE TO ADVENTURERS

By John Buchan

THE KNIFE BEHIND THE CURTAIN

By Valentine Williams

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY